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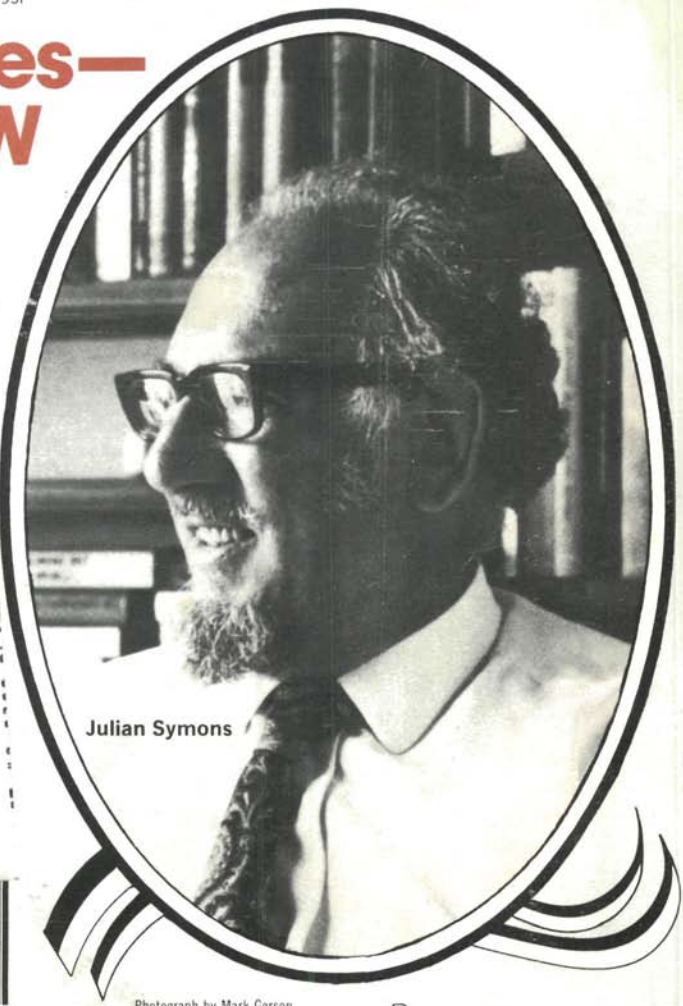

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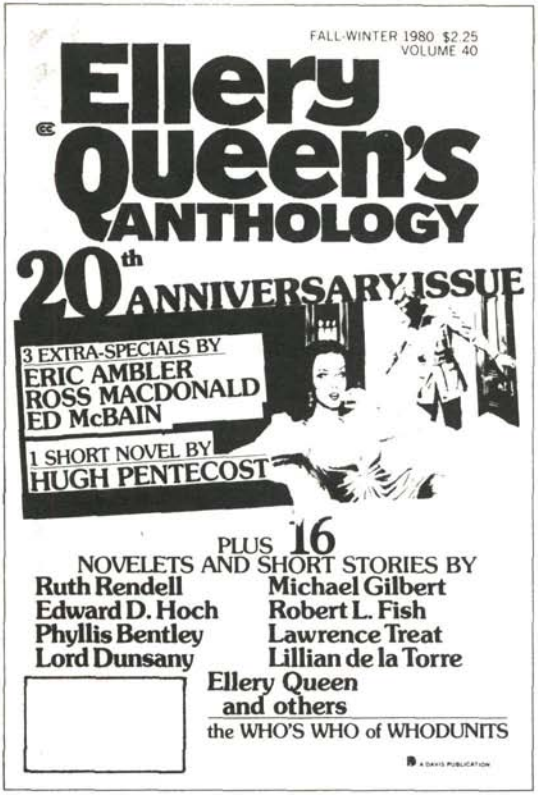

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 76, No. 6, Whole No. 447, December 1, 1980. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.35 a copy. Annual subscription $16.25 in U.S.A. and possessions; $18.50 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, CT 06836. Controlled circulation postage paid at Dallas, PA. *© 1980 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE ® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet, the unique thief, now charges $25,000 for stealing nothing—that is, objects of no value whatsoever. Now, how much should Nick charge for stealing a turkey? A turkey with nothing inside, nothing except white meat, dark meat, and bones? Well, maybe the turkey cost ten to fifteen dollars and is worth that much. But to be offered $1,000,000—one million bucks—to steal it? Forty times his usual fee to pilfer an ordinary turkey? It could happen only to Nick Velvet!

THE THEFT OF THE THANKSGIVING TURKEY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

When Nick Velvet was hired to steal a Thanksgiving turkey, his first thought was of two Sherlock Holmes stories. "There's no blue carbuncle hidden inside, is there? Or black pearls?"

"There's nothing inside the turkey," Hope Hastings assured him with a smile. She was the sort of young woman who smiled a great deal, and Nick liked her at once. In another age he could have imagined himself slaying a dragon for her. Now he was merely going to steal a turkey.

"Nothing?"

"Except what's always in a turkey. We know you don't steal anything of value. You have my word that this is an ordinary store-bought bird costing less than fifteen dollars."

"You realize my fee is twenty-five thousand dollars."

She waved that aside. "Money is no object, Mr. Velvet. But we do have two very important conditions."

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"Oh?"

"The turkey cannot be stolen before Thanksgiving morning—"

"Agreed."

"—and no one must know it's been stolen."

"What? You mean you want me to substitute another bird?"

"No, no! This is very important! You must steal the turkey and leave them without a turkey, but you can't let them know the theft has occurred."

"How do you expect me to do that?"

"That's why we've come to you, Mr. Velvet. If it was a matter of walking into the house with guns we could have hired a couple of hoods for a few hundred dollars."

"Where is this turkey? Or more important, where will it be a week from today on Thanksgiving morning?"

"At the home of Cedric Rose, a wealthy real-estate developer. He resides in a suburb of Philadelphia." She handed him the address. "It's customary for Rose and his wife to have their two married children home for Thanksgiving dinner. There are two grandchildren as well. A cook prepares the dinner with Mrs. Rose's help. It is for eight people and they will dine around two in the afternoon."

"All right," he agreed.

"You can do it? You won't let us down?"

"I can do it," Nick promised.

Hope Hastings smiled again and rose to leave. "You have my number," she said. "Phone me at once if there are any problems."

That was on Thursday. On Friday morning Gloria decided to clean out the basement and unearthed a pair of crosscountry skis that Nick hadn't seen in years. He didn't see them that day either, where she'd leaned them against the basement steps. Not until after he'd tripped over them, fallen, and broken his ankle.

Gloria surveyed Nick's cast, propped up on the stool in front of him, and shook her head. "Nicky, I don't know how it happened! I just looked away for a minute and I heard you tumbling down the steps."

"I always knew those things weren't safe. Now I'm in a cast till after Christmas!"

"You're lucky they didn't keep you in the hospital a few days. They wanted to, you know."

"This ankle is going to cost us twenty-five thousand bucks. I had a job for Thanksgiving morning."

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"Oh, Nicky!"

"Help me over to the phone, will you? I have to break the news to my client."

He called the number that Hope Hastings had given him, and told her about it. "I've never let down a client before, but I'm afraid the deal's off. I broke my ankle."

"Broke your ankle? How, for God's sake?"

"In a skiing accident."

"Skiing? But there isn't any snow!"

"I know."

"But don't you have someone else who could—?"

"Afraid not. I'm out of action till the first of the year, maybe longer."

There was a hint of desperation in her voice. "Look, this is very important to us. A great deal is at stake."

"Sorry. It was an act of God. Maybe you can hire someone else."

"No one but you could steal that turkey under the necessary conditions, without the theft being discovered."

"I'm not sure I could have done it either. I hadn't figured out how yet."

"Look, Mr. Velvet, could I come over there and talk to you? This is very important."

"To my house? I don't usually—"

"Please!"

Nick glanced at Gloria. "All right. I'm up in Westchester. It's late tonight but I'll see you in the morning if you want to come. I can't imagine what good it'll do you, though."

On Saturday morning at ten thirty Hope Hastings walked into his living room. She wasn't smiling any more. At the sight of his cast-bound ankle her expression turned almost to despair. Gloria looked her over with a critical eye and then retreated from the room.

"Does it hurt much?" Hope asked, arranging herself in a chair opposite him.

"Only when I laugh. Look, I'm really sorry about this, but there's nothing I can do."

"Can't you get around on crutches?"

"I suppose so," Nick said. "I've tried it a little. Luckily it's only a simple fracture. But you don't see too many thieves on crutches these days."

She moistened her lips with her tongue. "How much do you want to go through with it?"

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"It's not a matter of money. I'm not physically able to steal anything but a nap right now."

She opened her purse and took out a thick white envelope with a rubber band around it. "Here is your usual fee of twenty-five thousand. I'm paying the whole thing in advance."

"You don't seem to understand—"

"If you steal the turkey and everything works out, we'll pay you another nine hundred seventy-five thousand dollars."

Nick's mouth fell open. "Let me get this straight. You're offering me—"

"One million dollars."

"—to steal a turkey?"

"That's correct, Mr. Velvet."

Nick stared down at the plaster cast on his ankle. Then he said, "Miss Hastings, I think you've just made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Nick spent the rest of Saturday and all of Sunday puzzling over his problem. Finally he said to Gloria, "We're going to Philadelphia. I have to get a little closer to the action."

"How can you travel with that ankle, Nicky?"

"You'll drive us down and I can ride in the back seat with my leg propped up."

"I don't like it. You're just doing it for that woman!"

"I'm doing it for a million dollars, Gloria."

"That's too much money. Nobody needs that much."

"Aren't you just a little bit curious? What makes an ordinary Thanksgiving turkey worth a million dollars? If it was solid gold it wouldn't be worth that amount, even at today's gold prices."

"Who'd want a gold turkey for Thanksgiving?"

"Come on, help me up. We're going to Philadelphia."

It rained most of the way there, but by midnight on Sunday they were in a motel only a few miles from the residence of Cedric Rose. Nick felt better almost immediately. His ankle still throbbed at times, and he still didn't know how he was going to steal the turkey, but at least he was active, he was doing something.

On Monday morning they drove past the Rose house—a traditional white colonial that looked too big for just Rose and his wife. Nick studied it from his awkward position in the back seat. "You're going to have to help me," he told Gloria.

"How, Nicky?"

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"You have to get inside the house. I need a description of the main floor, especially the kitchen."

"How am I going to get that?"

He thought about it. "You can be taking a survey. We'll try to pick a time when the Roses aren't home and you can talk to the cook. Offer her five dollars to answer a dozen questions about her appliances. That should get you in."

That afternoon they rented a typewriter and Nick helped Gloria prepare an official-looking interview form. There were a few innocent general questions and then some specific ones about preparing Thanksgiving dinner. If Gloria came up with the right answers they'd be on their way to $1,000,000.

Nick remained at the motel room Tuesday morning while she returned to the house alone. Waiting for her to come back was one of the hardest things Nick had ever done. It was raining again as he sat staring out the window, watching for her car before she'd been gone even ten minutes. He'd never sent Gloria on this sort of mission before and he wondered what he would do if she was arrested.

He remembered once when she'd been kidnaped for a few days—how awful it had been for him. It was like those days all over again and he dreaded the wait for her. Even $1,000,000 wouldn't be much without Gloria.

It was nearly noon when she returned, smiling. "You'll be proud of me," she announced. "I got everything you needed and more besides."

"Tell me about it." He shifted his leg to a more comfortable position.

"Well, I parked down the street as you said and pretty soon I saw this big white-haired man and a blonde woman come out and get in the car. I figured they were the Roses and I was right. As soon as they left I walked up to the house with my clipboard and question sheet. The cook didn't want to let me in at first but when I mentioned a gift of five dollars for her time she let me in quickly enough. Took me right to the kitchen and showed me everything. I had a spray can of oven cleaner with me, as you suggested, and I made her think the survey was for the company that manufactured it. That was my only mistake because they've got a new microwave oven that's self-cleaning."

"A microwave?" Nick's interest perked.

"They've only had it a month. The cook—her name's Milly—said

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she was afraid of it at first but she's getting used to it now. She certainly is a talking machine! I was there nearly an hour and learned the whole family history. Cedric Rose is a Texas oilman who got into real estate and moved north. He owns two apartment buildings in New York and a lot of land in western Canada. He's a partner with somebody in Toronto—a man named Jenkins—and he flies up there about once a month. His wife Sandy used to be a Las Vegas showgirl but now she's well over forty and bleaches her hair."

"You certainly found out everything."

"They have a son and a daughter, both married. The son is a lawyer with two children, six and eight. The daughter teaches school while her husband works for his master's degree. They all come on Thanksgiving."

"What about the kitchen?" Nick asked impatiently. "What time does the bird go in the oven?"

"Shortly before noon. It doesn't take long in a microwave oven."

"That's cutting it pretty close," Nick said, more to himself than to Gloria. "I'm supposed to phone Hope Hastings at her hotel by noon, to let her know I've succeeded."

"Anyway, let me finish my story," Gloria insisted. "I was sitting in the kitchen filling out the form when back they came."

"Back who came?"

"The Roses, of course. Nicky, he has a Texas drawl and wears cowboy boots! I couldn't believe it!"

"Did they see you?"

"Of course they saw me! She was very pleasant but he was sort of gruff. I just said a few words and then left."

"Here, draw me a diagram of the kitchen. Show me where the back door is, and the oven."

"You can't go hobbling in there and steal that turkey!"

"For a million dollars you'd be amazed at what I can do." He studied the floor plan of the kitchen as she drew it. "What's this room?"

"A pantry. When the kitchen was modernized they left it there for storage."

"Okay. Tonight you'll drive me out there. I have to get a look at that lock on the back door."

"Nicky, this is insanity! You're on crutches!"

"I can do it, as long as this rain doesn't turn to snow or ice." With practise in the motel room he'd managed to get around, after a fashion, on one aluminum crutch.

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Progress was slow, but at least it left him with one hand free.

That night, shortly after eleven, Gloria parked around the corner from the Rose home and Nick hobbled through somebody's yard to approach their house from the rear. It would be daylight on Thursday, of course, and neighbors might see him, but that was a chance he'd have to take. When he finally reached the back door the sight of the lock pleased him. It was a simple one, easily picked, and he assumed that even if the house had an alarm system at night it would be shut off during the day with a house full of people. He hobbled back to the car on his crutch.

"I was scared out of my wits," Gloria told him when he was safely inside. "What if you'd fallen?"

"I'd have picked myself up. Let's get back to the motel. I have a list of things you'll have to get for me tomorrow."

On Wednesday morning Gloria purchased a pair of asbestos gloves at a welding supply house in Philadelphia. She also bought a small blue duffel bag such as a seaman might carry. Though the canvas was heavy Nick insisted they line it with a double thickness of aluminum foil held in place with safety pins. "The turkey goes in here," he explained to Gloria, "and it might be very hot."

He spent much of Wednesday hobbling around the block near the motel on his single crutch. He experimented in the room with a sixteen-pound frozen turkey they'd purchased at a nearby supermarket, but the results were not satisfactory. Nick looked at Gloria with frustration. "When I lift the bird out of the oven I need two hands, and that means I can't be supporting my bum leg with the crutch."

"I've been telling you it can't be done, Nicky."

"What I need is a walking cast on this ankle."

"The doctor back home said it was too soon for a walking cast."

"That was five days ago. Besides, I'll only need to rest my weight on it for a minute or so."

They found a doctor who reluctantly agreed to remove his cast and replace it with a smaller walking cast. Nick felt better immediately, though he resisted the impulse to rest his weight on the foot.

"Now we find a restaurant," he told Gloria.

"To eat dinner?"

"No, to cook this turkey we bought."

They located a place that was nearly empty and Nick spoke to the

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chef. When the man learned what was wanted he threw his hands up in despair. "You are mad! I will not do it!"

"Come on, it's a little joke on a friend."

"This is a perfectly good turkey and you want me to ruin it!"

Nick produced two $100 bills from his pocket. "I'm willing to pay well for your trouble."

The man looked at the money and then back at Nick holding the frozen turkey. "All right," he said with a sigh. "Come back around ten o'clock." He took the bird and went into the kitchen with it.

When they came back Nick was delighted with the result. The turkey had been roasted till it resembled a large black lump of charcoal. "I didn't bother much with stuffing," the chef told them, "since nobody's going to eat it."

"That's fine—perfect, in fact!" He gave the chef an extra hundred dollars.

"The world is full of nuts these days," the man grumbled as Nick and Gloria went out, carrying the charred turkey in the foil-lined duffel bag.

Nick phoned Hope Hastings back in New York and told her everything was on schedule. "We'll drive down in the morning," she said. "Be sure to call our hotel by noon, as soon as you have the bird."

Nick hung up, wondering once more why a Thanksgiving turkey was worth $1,000,000 and who Hope Hastings' partner was.

Thanksgiving Day dawned sunny but cold. "We're in luck," Nick told Gloria when he looked out the window. "At least I won't have any trouble walking."

"How are you going to get them out of the kitchen while you steal the turkey?"

"You're going to help with that. I'll explain on the way. First let me get dressed."

She'd bought him a navy pea-jacket and dark blue pants, along with a little white sailor's hat. It wasn't really a disguise, and he didn't expect anyone to mistake him for a wounded veteran left over from the last war, but at least it might make the duffel bag with the turkey less obvious.

They reached the home of Cedric Rose shortly before eleven and Gloria parked around the corner. "Two cars in the driveway. The children must have arrived early."

"What do you want me to do, Nicky?"

"Give me fifteen minutes to reach the back door and make sure

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the turkey's in the oven. Then walk up to the front door and ring the bell. Chances are the cook will answer it, but if someone else comes you should ask for Milly. Tell them you want to complete the survey you took a few days ago. Be very friendly and gracious, but keep Milly at the front door, away from the kitchen, for five minutes if you can."

"That might be tough in the midst of dinner preparations."

"I know, but give me as long as you can."

She leaned over and kissed him. "Good luck, Nicky."

"Thanks." He climbed out of the car, carrying the bag containing the blackened turkey over his shoulder, and started hobbling along the sidewalk on his crutch.

His nighttime route through the back yards was not satisfactory by day, but he'd noticed a route along a tall hedge that kept him from the neighbors' view. It took him right up to the Roses' yard, within 30 feet of the back door. He could hear the noises of dinner preparation as he reached the door and inserted his pick in the lock. This was the most dangerous moment, when a curious neighbor might spot him and phone Cedric Rose. But he hoped people were busy with their own pursuits on Thanksgiving morning.

Through the curtained window he could see the cook Milly bustling around. A blonde woman—Sandy Rose—appeared in the kitchen once, but only for a few moments. Nick glanced at his watch, realizing he'd given himself too much time to reach the door. Then there was the sound of door chimes from within the house and he breathed easier. Gloria was right on schedule.

Milly put down a bowl of salad and went through the swinging door to answer the bell. Nick's skilled fingers finished manipulating the lock pick and the kitchen door swung open. He closed it quietly behind him and crossed the room to the glass-doored microwave oven. The turkey was in there, just beginning to turn brown. From the duffel bag Nick took a towel he'd borrowed from the motel and spread it on the counter. Quickly donning the asbestos gloves, he opened the oven door. This was the tricky part, when he had to abandon the crutch and put his weight on the walking cast for just a moment. He lifted out the turkey and placed it on the towel, replacing it in the oven with the charred bird he'd brought with him. Shutting the oven door, he wrapped the partially cooked bird with the towel and placed both in the duffel bag.

As he bent to pick up the bag, Sandy Rose came through the swinging door, head turned to speak over her shoulder. "—Talking

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to someone at the front door while the dinner burns up! Honestly, that girl!"

Nick had only an instant to duck behind the pantry door before Mrs. Rose looked in his direction. The duffel bag with the stolen turkey still sat on the floor in plain view, but just then Sandy Rose wasn't noticing it. Her attention was distracted by the view through the oven window.

"The turkey!" She ran to the swinging door. "Cedric, come look at this turkey!"

Nick opened the pantry door wide enough to use his crutch to snag the drawstring of the duffel bag and pull it to him. But there was no chance to leave his hiding place before Cedric Rose stormed into the kitchen. "What's all this fuss and noise?" he asked with a thick Texas drawl.

"Milly ruined the turkey."

"I did not!" the cook insisted, returning from the front door. But when she saw the charred bird through the window she burst into tears. "How could that happen? I was only away a minute!"

Sandy turned off the oven and opened the door. "It's ruined—ruined! It's burnt to a crisp!"

"That damned oven did it!" Milly insisted. "I never did trust it!"

"Hard to imagine it could get that burnt in five minutes," Cedric Rose said. "Maybe the oven is defective, Sandy. Those microwaves do funny things at times."

"So what do we do for Thanksgiving dinner?" his wife demanded. "The children are—"

Milly was trying to make amends. "The stores around here are all closed today, but there's a supermarket over in Glenside that's always open. I could drive over and see if they had a frozen turkey."

Cedric Rose thought it over. "No, that's twenty minutes each way, and if the oven is defective we'd just burn up another turkey. I guess there's nothing to do but take the family out for dinner."

His wife agreed readily enough. "I'll phone Marcel's for a reservation."

"And call the oven people in the morning, damn it! This thing is still under the guarantee. Keep the turkey for them to see."

Milly was still sobbing. "I feel terrible about the turkey, Mr. Rose. I was only away for a few minutes."

"Don't worry about it. Finish cleaning up here and then you can go home."

"What about the pumpkin pie and all the other things?"

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"Take some of it home with you," he suggested. "We won't be using it now."

Cedric Rose followed his wife into the other room, but Milly remained in the kitchen drying her tears and starting to clean up. Nick knew that he was trapped in the pantry until she went home, which could be another hour or two. There was no way he could sneak out with his crutch and duffel bag without being seen, and he could only hope Milly wouldn't come into the pantry for anything.

But it was almost noon and he hadn't phoned Hope Hastings.

He was still worrying about that five minutes later when he looked out the pantry window and saw Gloria in the back yard. He signaled her and tried to open the window but it was painted shut. Breaking it would surely bring discovery, and he doubted if he could climb through it anyway with his leg in a cast. He made frustrating signs to Gloria, holding up the duffel bag to show her he had the turkey. Finally he took a piece of notepaper from his pocket and printed two words on it: *Phone Hope!* Gloria read it and nodded. She hurried away and Nick tried to relax.

The kitchen sounds grew closer, but Milly didn't enter the pantry. He heard her opening and closing cabinets as she cleaned up. Shortly before one o'clock Sandy Rose returned to the kitchen. "I think we'll be leaving now, Milly. Our reservation is for two o'clock, but we want to show the children some property Cedric is developing. You can leave any time."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rose. I'm sorry again about the turkey."

"Don't worry. It was probably the oven." She paused at the door. "And take that pie with you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Rose."

Nick waited another five minutes and heard two of the cars pulling away from the house. Alone at last, Milly seemed to regain her spirits and started to hum a little. She turned on a kitchen radio to some rock music, and Nick feared she was settling down to spend the afternoon.

But a half hour later the radio was turned off and he heard the kitchen door open and close. From the window he saw Milly cross the back yard and walk down the driveway to the street. He sighed and stepped into the kitchen, carrying the turkey with him. It was safe to leave the house now, and he hoped Gloria had come back for him after she called Hope.

He decided to exit by the front door, because it was closer to the street and it would look less suspicious. He was just reaching for

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the knob when it started to turn. Nick froze, then turned to find a hiding place, knowing there was no time to reach one.

The front door swung open and Hope Hastings walked in with a tall man Nick had never seen before.

"As long as you're still here you might as well stay a while," Hope said with a smile. "This is my business associate, Ronald Miles."

Miles and Nick shook hands. "You got the turkey in there?" Miles asked, pointing to the duffel bag.

"That's right," Nick said. He clung to his crutch with one hand while he pulled open the drawstrings with the other. "One million-dollar turkey. Will you eat it here or take it with you?"

"The bird isn't important," Hope told him. "But we had to get them out of the house. What better way to get people out on Thanksgiving than to steal their turkey? But we needed someone as skillful as you so they wouldn't realize it was a plot."

"How'd you get the duplicate key?" Nick asked. She still held it in her hand.

"Wax impression. Some things never change. But that was the easy part. It was the turkey that stumped us."

"And now you're going to rob the place?"

Hope shook her head. "No—do we look like common housebreakers?"

"If you wanted them out of the house and you're not going to rob it, why didn't you hire somebody to burn it down. Arsonists come a lot cheaper than I do."

"We needed the house as it is." She seemed to notice his cast for the first time. "How's the ankle feeling?"

"I'm managing."

"Sit down and relax. We might have to wait a while."

"For what?"

"The telephone."

Miles cleared his throat. "I wouldn't tell him too much, Hope."

"Why not? He's in it for a full share if this thing comes off. Come on, let's use the phone in Rose's study. It's got a speaker, so we can all listen in."

"You know a great deal about this house."

She smiled again. "I made it my business to. We're playing for big stakes."

"Mind telling me what it's all about? Why was it worth a million dollars to get Rose and his family out of the house?"

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"It's a business deal of the biggest sort."

Nick lowered himself carefully into an armchair in the study. "A business deal on Thanksgiving?"

"That's just the point! It isn't Thanksgiving in Canada. Theirs came in October."

The telephone rang as if on cue. Hope Hastings glanced at the clock. "A bit early but it could be him. Get ready, Ron."

She picked up the phone and pressed the button for a conference call. "Hello?"

The voice of the caller came from a speaker next to the phone. "I'm calling Cedric Rose."

"This is his daughter," Hope said with a straight face. "We're just sitting down to dinner."

"Oh, that's right. It's Thanksgiving down there, isn't it? I hate to interrupt, but could you tell him Mac Jenkins is on the phone from Toronto. It's extremely urgent."

"Certainly, Mr. Jenkins. I've heard my father mention you many times. Hold on and I'll get him."

She waited about ten seconds, then handed the phone to Ronald Miles. He threw back his head and announced, "I'm here, Mac. Good hearing from you." The Texas drawl was perfect, and suddenly it was all clear to Nick. He'd stolen the turkey to get them all out of the house, so this man named Ronald Miles could be brought in to answer the phone call from Toronto and imitate Cedric Rose's voice.

"Sorry to interrupt your Thanksgiving meal," Mac Jenkins said, his voice filling the small study. "But something important's come up about that oil land in Alberta. They're offering five million for it, but the offer's only good till the close of business today. Sounds a bit low to me, but it's your decision, Cedric."

"Low is right," the Texas drawl answered. "But give me a minute to think about it, will you? That's a million more than they've been offering right along."

"Sure, but you told me yourself the land was worth ten. The way the price of oil is going, if the Canadian government decontrols it that land could be worth twenty or thirty."

"You're talking futures now, Mac. Sometimes we have to examine what the present offers."

"Look, Cedric, I'm the one who signs the contract, but you know it's your decision. We've been partners in too many things over the years, and when it comes to oil I value your word over anyone's. Just tell me what to do."

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Miles seemed to hesitate a moment, for dramatic effect. Then he said, "Let's sell, Mac. Let's take the five million."

"I hope we won't regret it."

"No one ever regretted making five million dollars."

"All right. It's done."

Hope Hastings relaxed and smiled at Nick. Miles winked at them and said into the phone, "How's the weather up there today?"

"Pretty cold—only three above zero."

"Three above! You must have icicles hanging from your ears! It was thirty-eight here this morning and I thought that was cold!"

"Ah—yes. How's the family?"

"Fine. I've got to get back to the table before the turkey cools off."

"I won't keep you. Thanks for the advice, Cedric. I'll close the deal this afternoon."

"We won't regret it, Mac. 'Bye now."

The connection was broken and Miles hung up the phone. "How'd I do?"

Hope Hastings ran over to kiss him. "Terrific! You sounded just like him!"

"I should, after two weeks of watching him and listening to him on those video tapes. I've even got some of his gestures down pat."

"You won't need them any more. It's all over." She turned to Nick, unable to control her enthusiasm. "And you're a million dollars richer!"

"I hope so."

"The people I work for in Canada already have a buyer for that land—at twenty-two million! But Cedric Rose wouldn't sell at any price. He was too smart for that. We had to put the words into his mouth, but we managed to do it."

"He'll know what happened."

"Sooner or later. But once Jenkins signs the contract selling the land there's nothing anyone can do. Because of Canadian tax laws the corporation is in Jenkins' name, with other Canadians as officers. Rose is just a silent partner. Most of the money is his, but his name isn't on the books. We've committed no crime in Canada, and what have we done in this country besides breaking and entering, and stealing a turkey?"

"Conspiracy to commit fraud?" Nick suggested.

Hope Hastings kept smiling. "Now you're being technical."

"Come on," Miles suggested in his own voice. "What say we get out of here before the family gets back from dinner?"

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"Good idea," Hope agreed. "Can we give you a lift, Mr. Velvet?"

"Thanks, but I've got a ride. Don't forget your turkey. You're paying well for it."

"You'll have the rest of your money by next week," she promised, picking up the duffel bag. "I don't really need this but I'll dump it somewhere."

They started toward the front door. Nick was hobbling behind on his crutch, and so he happened to glance out the side window to see the police car pulling up. He decided suddenly to go out through the kitchen, the way he had entered.

He was opening the back door when he heard the police officers intercepting Hope and Miles at the front entrance. "Hold it right there, you two! Hands up!"

Hope's voice, in a rage: "What's the meaning of this? We haven't done anything!"

"We'll see, lady. We got an emergency call from Toronto saying you might have done something to Cedric Rose."

Nick didn't wait to hear any more.

Gloria was waiting for him in the car. "Not so fast, Nicky—you should be more careful with that ankle!"

"Let's get out of here fast—there are police around the corner!"

She gunned the motor to life and they turned down the nearest side street, zigzagging for several blocks till they were sure no one was following. "Did you get the rest of the money?" she finally asked.

"No such luck! I guess I should be happy they paid me the twenty-five thousand in advance."

"What happened?"

He told her about the phone call and the arrival of the police.

"You mean that Mac Jenkins called the cops from Toronto?"

"That's right."

"But how did he know something was wrong if this Miles had the voice down so perfect?"

Nick sighed and shifted his ankle to a more comfortable position. "Miles made a stupid mistake. I realized it right away, but I was hoping Jenkins wouldn't tumble to it."

"What mistake, Nicky?"

"Jenkins said the temperature in Toronto was only three above zero, and Miles said something about icicles and how he thought it was cold here this morning at thirty-eight. Now the real Cedric Rose visited Toronto about once a month. Certainly he'd know that Ca-

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nadians now measure temperature on the Celsius scale. And four degrees Celsius is above freezing. In fact, it's almost exactly the same as thirty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. That mistake, plus Rose's sudden agreement to the land offer, must have made Jenkins suspicious enough to call the police."

"Now the deal won't go through and you won't get the million dollars."

"That's right," Nick said. But remembering Hope Hastings and her smile, he wondered if she'd ever have paid him anyway. Some day, if he met her again, he'd have to ask her.

DETECTIVERSE

SOUNDLESS LEE

by MARK GRENIER

Says a burglar who's known as Lee Gray
Of the victims he robs every day,
  "By the time they're aware
  That I've ever been there,
I have silently stolen away."

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a pastiche of Nick Velvet by

J. F. PEIRCE

You know that an author's character has reached general popularity and acceptance when other authors begin to write pastiches or parodies of that character. Well, Edward D. Hoch's thief, Nick Velvet, has arrived—here is a pastiche of the unique pilferer. It concerns Vic Velour (good!), is ostensibly written by Ad Hoc (very good!), and is a companion piece to the real McHoch in this issue, "The Theft of the Thanksgiving Turkey" . . .

THE THEFT THAT WASN'T A THEFT

by AD HOC

a.k.a. J. F. Peirce

"I'll pay you one million dollars to steal nothing," Mallory said. Next to Harry Winston he was the biggest seller of egg-sized gems in the world.

Anyone but Vic Velour would have raised his eyebrows at the offer. Vic's initials were VV, double fives. For $55,000 he would steal anything worth no more than 55 cents.

Once he stole most of the threads from a diva's dress, so that when she expanded her magnificent chest to hit a high note, the remaining threads burst, leaving her revealed for all to see.

"You'll pay me a million to steal nothing, when you know my fee is only fifty-five thou? I never ask my clients why they're willing to pay so much to have something valueless stolen, but why would you pay me more than eighteen times my normal fee?"

Winston smiled.

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"Because you'll probably be arrested. I'm paying for your word that *if* you're caught, you'll take the rap without revealing that I hired you."

"How do you know you can trust me?"

"The woman who told me about you said that I could."

"Very well, you have my word. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to open the front door of my office, setting off its silent alarm. Then leave the door open and escape if you can. I want to see how quickly the security guards on the floor below respond."

Vic frowned. It didn't make sense. If he stole nothing, the most he could be charged with would be breaking and entering. "Why not trip the alarm yourself," he said, "and time them? That wouldn't cost you a dime."

"Because I also want to see if you can break in—find out how much protection their locks really are."

"Any lock can be picked, but it can take so much time that the thief may be caught in the act."

"Will you take the job?"

Vic nodded. "When and how do I get paid?"

Mallory removed a card from his wallet and handed it to Vic. "I've paid one million dollars into this Swiss bank account. Call the bank, give Herr Karl Raeber this code number, and ask him to transfer the money to another account—your account. He's expecting your call. You should be able to reach him tonight."

Vic slipped the card into his pocket. His eyes swept the room. Among other things it contained a large safe with double doors and a console with an aquarium on it. Fish rested on its pebbled bottom among the plants. The safe doors were open, revealing velvet-lined trays containing rows of diamonds.

Mallory smiled. "I have an insured inventory of twenty million. Most of the stones are worth fifty to a hundred thousand each, but two are valued at over a million apiece."

"I'm amazed anyone would insure them when you keep them in a safe, not in a vault."

"Ordinarily they wouldn't, but since this building has such tight security—because of the nature of the businesses in it—and since the security agency has its office on the floor beneath, they've agreed. However, they *are* threatening to cancel my policy. I want to prove to them that the gems are safe.

"Every visitor to this building has to have an appointment with someone before he can enter the building, and he has to go through

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a security check before he can enter or leave. All office doors are kept locked. Visitors have to pass a visual inspection through a spy hole before being admitted.

"As for this safe, it rests on pressure plates, whose wires go through the floor to the security office below. If it's moved a fraction of an inch or if a torch or a drill is applied to it anywhere, alarms go off in the security office. The guards claim they can be here with guns drawn before anyone can escape. You're to test that. Let me show you the rest of our safeguards."

He led the way to the outer office, where an attractive secretary was typing. "This is Miss Doyle. She's preparing our fall catalog for the printer. She's also a crack shot."

One moment Miss Doyle was typing; the next she was pointing an ugly-looking automatic at Vic. He hadn't even seen where it came from, and he didn't like the look in her eye.

"Thank you, Miss Doyle," Mallory said.

The gun disappeared, and she resumed typing.

Vic let out an audible sigh.

Beyond the reception area were bullet-proof glass cases secured to pedestals and lighted by small spotlights. Each case contained a single diamond displayed on a black-velvet cloth with a tiny red devil appliquéd in one corner.

"My trademark," Mallory said, pointing to it. "The Old Nick."

"Do you leave the gems in the cases overnight?" Vic asked.

"No. We collect them in trays and put them in the safe."

Opposite the last case was a side door. Mallory flipped a switch that turned off the alarm, then opened the door and showed Vic its intricate double-locking mechanism.

"When the alarm is on," Mallory said, "it's activated every time one of the outer doors is opened unless it's opened with two keys. Miss Doyle has one, I have the other.

"Both keys have to be turned in unison. If only one key is turned or if they're turned one at a time, the alarm will go off."

And if only one lock were picked, Vic realized, the alarm would go off. The security guards would be on their way after the first lock was picked. They would catch him in the act of picking the second lock, before he got the door open. There were two doors in the interior wall. Mallory opened one of them, revealing a lavatory.

"What's behind the other door?" Vic asked.

Mallory opened it, revealing a storage closet containing a vacuum cleaner and supplies.

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"Why the vacuum cleaner?" Vic asked.

"Miss Doyle sweeps and dusts each morning, eliminating the need to admit janitorial personnel. I pay her extra to do the cleaning."

"Is there a trash chute in the office?"

Mallory looked at Vic as if he were asking too many questions. "There's one in the hall," he said, leading Vic back to his office.

"You should be able to do the job tomorrow," Mallory said, "anytime after we close at 3:30. I want to be notified that you're definitely going to do it before I leave for the day."

"Will do. Is that all?"

"Please close the door after you," Mallory said in dismissal.

Miss Doyle stopped typing when Vic passed her and flipped off the alarm so that he could leave.

Vic crossed the hall, opened the door to the fire stairs, and walked down the single flight to the lobby.

The building directory was next to the elevator. Vic studied the names of businesses on the fourth floor, then stepped into a phone booth, looked up a number, and dialed.

"Benedict's Coins and Stamps here."

"How late do you stay open?" Vic asked.

"Till 4:30."

"My name's Taylor. I'd like to make an appointment for three o'clock tomorrow to purchase some coins."

"Very well, Mr. Taylor, I'll see you then."

Vic hung up the receiver and crossed the lobby to the security-guard desk next to the main entrance. The guard was examining the contents of a salesman's attaché case before allowing him to leave.

The guard took Vic's building pass, ran a metal detector quickly over him, then thanked him and waved him on.

Hallie greeted Vic at the door.

"I've just become a millionaire," Vic said.

Hallie showed no surprise. If Vic were to step into a phone booth and emerge as Superman, she wouldn't have been surprised. Worried, perhaps, but not surprised.

"What I can't understand," Vic said after telling her what had happened, "is why Mallory would pay a million dollars to protect twenty million in gems. He can't have more than ten million tied up in them. And he could hire a locksmith to open his office door while he watched for less than a hundred."

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"It doesn't make sense," Hallie agreed.

"Unless he's setting me up for something and paying me to take the rap."

"And will you?"

"*Only* if I'm caught."

At three the next afternoon Vic appeared at the guard desk dressed in a yellow T-shirt and slacks and tan crepe-soled shoes. Large-lensed dark glasses concealed his eyes and much of his face. He signed the register "J. T. Taylor," then wrote "Benedict's Coins and Stamps" in the appropriate space.

The guard wrote down the time, then called to verify Vic's appointment before giving him a pass.

Once admitted to Benedict's Coins and Stamps, Vic said, "I'm interested in coins as an inflation hedge. I plan to invest two hundred dollars a month. What can you show me?"

The clerk checked several file cards, then took two coins out of glassine envelopes and put them on a mat so that Vic could examine them.

After a minute of inspection Vic said, "Let me go outside and think it over, then I'll decide which one I want."

The clerk let him out and relocked the door.

Vic took the elevator to the lobby. Stepping into a phone booth, he dialed Mallory's office.

"Mr. Velour to see Mr. Mallory," he said, imitating the guard's voice when Miss Doyle answered.

"You may send him up," she said.

Minutes later Vic told Mallory, "I'm ready to go."

Mallory looked surprised. "I thought you'd call."

"Phones can be bugged. Secretaries can listen in."

"But where are your picks, your tools?"

"I'll have them when I need them."

"But you aren't dressed like a thief."

"How do thieves dress?" Vic asked.

"Surely they don't call attention to themselves as you do."

Vic smiled. That was the point, he explained. No one would expect a thief to call attention to himself. "Don't worry," he added, "I'll wear a top hat and tails if the occasion demands."

Miss Doyle stopped typing as he stepped out of Mallory's office.

"Mind if I wash my hands?" he asked.

She nodded in the direction of the lavatory and resumed typing.

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Vic walked to the rear of the office. At the side door he flipped off the alarm switch, then opened the door, and quickly slipped a credit card between the door and the jamb.

Entering the lavatory he let the water run.

Moments later he said, "Thanks," as Miss Doyle let him out.

There was no one in sight.

Going to the side door, he let himself back in, retrieving his credit card. He could hear Miss Doyle typing.

After checking to make sure that the side door was locked, he flipped on the alarm, then entered the supply closet, closing the door behind him. He could still hear the rat-a-tat-tat of Miss Doyle's typing, now slightly muffled.

He forced himself to relax.

The typing stopped sometime later, and he could hear Mallory and Miss Doyle talking as they collected the diamonds.

"Is it all right if I vacuum now instead of in the morning?" Miss Doyle asked. "I have to get the catalog to the printer by noon."

Vic caught and held his breath.

"No. I need you to carry some things down to my car after I put these stones in the safe."

"I could come back if you'd give me your key."

"It's not necessary. You can skip vacuuming this once."

Vic let out his breath.

Sometime later he heard them leave, and he stepped out of the closet. The office was deserted, but surprisingly, the door to Mallory's office was ajar. Or was it surprising?

He pushed the door open with the handkerchief he'd been using to insure that he left no fingerprints.

The doors to the safe were open. The trays of smaller stones were full, but the trays that should have contained the larger gems were empty. The aquarium was gone.

Moments later Vic earned his million dollars by opening the outer office door, thus tripping the silent alarm. He hadn't promised to pick the lock. Mallory had only assumed that he would.

Vic crossed the hall, opened the door to the fire stairs, and stepped inside. As he closed the door quietly, he heard the lobby door open and two sets of footsteps clatter up the stairs.

Moving quickly, he made his way upward, turning the bend in the stairs a moment before the footsteps reached the second-floor landing and the hall door was yanked open.

After that he relaxed. He was breathing normally when the clerk

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opened the door of Benedict's Coins and Stamps.

"Made up your mind?" the clerk asked.

"Yes and no, so I decided to take both."

The clerk smiled when he let Vic out a few minutes later. "See you next month," he said.

Vic nodded, then took the elevator to the lobby. Crossing to the security desk, he handed the guard his pass, then showed him his receipt and the two coins in glassine envelopes.

A man not in uniform studied Vic closely as the guard ran the metal detector over Vic, then patted down his body.

"Would you mind waiting a minute?" the guard asked.

"Not at all," Vic said.

The guard dialed Benedict's Coins and Stamps and asked if Mr. Taylor had arrived and left at approximately the times logged. The clerk answered affirmatively without volunteering the information that Mr. Taylor had been gone during much of that time. Vic had assumed the clerk wouldn't volunteer information. And it wasn't likely that the guard would ask if Vic had been in Benedict's all the time.

The guard thanked Vic for waiting.

"Not at all," Vic said.

Later, with Hallie listening, Vic called Mallory. "Mission accomplished," he said.

"I'm surprised you called. Phones can be bugged, you said."

"You forgot to close the doors to your safe. I closed them for you. I was afraid the security men might rip you off and your insurance would be canceled."

"What was that about?" Hallie asked when Vic hung up.

"I was letting Mallory know that his plan had failed."

"What plan?"

"To set me up for stealing the diamonds so that he can collect for them twice—once from some buyer, and once from the insurance company. I suspect he's made a deal with some oil sheik who wants to use his American dollars without his countrymen's knowledge. Now he'll have to return the diamonds in the morning since there's no way he can account for their being missing."

"How could he have sneaked them out of the building since everything is searched?"

"He probably used the old invisible-diamond-in-the-aquarium gimmick."

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"How will the sheik get the diamonds out of the country? He must plan to do it clandestinely if Mallory figured he could report them stolen."

"Bright girl! He probably plans to smuggle them out in a diplomatic pouch—which won't be inspected."

Hallie smiled. "I suppose you'll be staying home this evening," she said.

"Unfortunately no. I have to call on Mallory—make him pay for trying to frame me and for being so greedy."

"How are you going to do that?"

"By going fishing. *I* won't be greedy. I'll just reach into the aquarium and take the first gem I touch. It'll be the luck of the draw whether it's worth a hundred thousand or a million." He grinned. "Who says honesty is not the best policy?"

DETECTIVERSE

LITERARY LARCENY

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A sneak thief, exceedingly deft,
Filched my *EQMM* and then left.
But when he was caught
With the mag that *I* bought
He was charged with committing grand theft.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JANE SPEED

It was a special night for Wilma DeLand, a special occasion. One might almost say, an anniversary. So she took even more care than usual . . . a delightful and subtle story . . .

A LADY OF REFINEMENT

by JANE SPEED

Wednesday again! Wilma DeLand had wakened to that joyous thought. And she prepared now, with even more than her usual care, to go out to dinner. Because tonight was by way of being a special little occasion. It was on another Wednesday just three months ago that they'd first set eyes on each other at Barlow's. She wondered if *he'd* remember, too.

Joseph would, she'd bet on it. Dear Joseph, who always waited on them, he didn't miss much; so attentive to his "regulars," so attuned to their likes and dislikes. That personal touch was what made dining at Barlow's such a pleasure.

Oh, not that Barlow's was one of those fabled eating places. Heavens, if it had been, Wilma could not have afforded to go there to begin with; would not—dread thought—have been sitting there that night *he* first walked in. No, Barlow's was merely a nice little neighborhood restaurant of the sort that, unfortunately, you don't see much any more: a cosy place with a steady trade but never a crowd, and with a quiet ambience that just suited them both. Indeed, they'd dined there so many Wednesdays since, Wilma had come to think of it as *their* restaurant.

Wilma always took particular pains with her makeup, though she'd never used much, even in her twenties. And, if anything, she

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applied it more sparingly now, determined not to go the way of so many women of her age—and well beyond—who had the mistaken notion that an ever thicker, brighter mask of paint could disguise the passage of time. So ill-advised. Wilma took a final approving look at her own reflection with its tasteful pale rose lipstick and the merest hint of blue eye shadow, then turned her attention to the problem of what to wear.

The problem was not that she had so many dresses to choose from, but that she had so few that were still presentable. What it boiled down to really was the beige or the blue wool. She pondered. The beige was somewhat newer, and it was well cut. But the blue, old as it was, was still her favorite. His, too, she rather suspected. Once, when she was standing beside him at the cashier's counter at Barlow's, he'd actually said to her, "Do you know something? That dress is exactly the color of your eyes." Wilma flushed with pleasure, remembering. For tonight the blue then, definitely the blue.

And, of course, she had her new purse to carry. She took it out of its wrappings and ran her hand lovingly over the butter-soft leather. Wickedly expensive, but worth it. "Buying cheap is false economy," Papa always warned her. "Buy quality and it will last." It was sound advice and Wilma tried to follow it, but it got harder all the time. She sighed.

Life seemed to have grown poorer and narrower in every way since Papa died. It took ever more careful planning for her to manage on the income from the modest inheritance he'd left her. That's why she'd moved last year to smaller quarters in this residence-hotel. And, oh, my, they were small; her suite, as it was rather grandly called, was merely a cramped bed-sitting room, bath, and tiny kitchenette. But she was getting accustomed to it, and it was nice to have a little money left over for something really good now and then, like this lovely purse.

She sat down on the daybed to transfer the contents of her old purse to the new one: keys, money, comb, compact, and, ah, yes, mustn't forget her dear diminutive revolver. The sight of it always made her smile. It still looked like a toy to her, a little objet d'art really with its pretty mother-of-pearl handle. "A ladylike weapon for a lady to defend her honor with," Papa had said in that half-joking way of his when he presented it to her. "A dainty thing, but quite sufficient for its purpose should you need it."

She never had, thank goodness, and she hoped she never would. Yet she always carried it with her, partly out of sentiment, but

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increasingly nowadays because its small comforting weight in her purse did make her feel safer on the streets. Especially at this time of year when the light began to go soon after 4:00 and by 7:00 it was quite solidly dark.

Seven? She glanced at the clock and sprang up in a flurry. Good heavens, it was nearly 7:00 already! She'd meant to *be* at Barlow's by now. It was all that dawdling over dresses and purses and such. Hastily she collected her things and with trembling hands adjusted her hat to a becoming angle. Then she locked the door behind her, and bypassing that slow-moving old wheeze of an elevator, hurried down the stairs, through the shabby lobby, and out the door.

The two blocks to the avenue had never seemed so long. Wilma half ran the distance. But once she'd turned the corner and had Barlow's in view, she slowed to a more dignified pace. No need to make a spectacle of herself. After all, maybe he'd be late, too; he sometimes was. And if not, well, she supposed it wouldn't be the end of the world if she didn't arrive first for once.

She always had, though. She'd made a point of it. She liked to be there and nicely settled so that she could savor the full effect of seeing him come in the door, then see his eyes crinkle in that little smile of recognition when he saw her in her usual place. A small thing, perhaps, but it was a moment Wilma cherished. What a pity if she'd missed it, tonight of all nights.

And she had, alas. As soon as she entered Barlow's she saw him, already seated. But her disappointment barely had time to register when it turned to cold riveting shock. Seated across the table from him was *another woman*!

Wilma wanted to turn on her heel and run, to fly, to hide. But before she could make her numb legs move, he'd caught sight of her, too. And—was it possible? could you believe it?—without a trace of shame, or even embarrassment, he merely nodded and smiled, as if there was nothing at all out of the ordinary in the situation.

This callousness cut even deeper than the initial shock of seeing them there. But Wilma gave no sign. A lady, she'd been taught, does not make a public display of her emotions. She forced her lips into a stiff little smile, every bit as impersonal as his. Then, proudly erect, eyes straight ahead, she walked past them, past her usual—her rightful—place, and seated herself two tables to the rear, next to the wall.

The familiar surroundings looked slightly askew from this unaccustomed angle. But here, at least, his back was to her. She could

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not have endured sitting through an entire meal facing him. And there was the added protection of another party of diners at the table between them.

Wilma was still so flustered she didn't notice that the waiter had come up beside her till he handed her a menu. "Would you care for something to drink first?" he asked.

The polite question only heightened her sense of dislocation. She *always* had a drink first. One preprandial highball. "A very civilized custom," Papa used to say, "and good for the digestion." Joseph knew that; knew, moreover, *what* she drank. In fact, he usually had her drink ready for her, brought it with the menu.

But of course, this was not Joseph. She could see dear Joseph up ahead serving the group of tables that were his proper province. So. She'd been displaced not only from her usual table, but from her usual waiter.

Then, remembering her manners, she smiled back at the strange face beside her and replied, "Yes, thank you. A bourbon and soda."

He hurried away to get it and Wilma cast her eye down the menu. Ordinarily a source of such pleasurable anticipation, tonight it simply daunted her. She could hardly bear the thought of ordering a meal, much less eating it. Oh, what was she doing here anyhow? Why didn't she just leave now, slip away quietly before the waiter came back? She clutched her purse and half rose from her chair.

But there was only one way out. She'd have to go past *them* again. And let him see that he'd driven her away without having her meal? No. She wouldn't give him that satisfaction. She sat back down, grimly resolved. She would order her dinner and she would eat it, every last bite; she would linger over it. She would not stir out of this restaurant until *they* had left.

The waiter set her drink in front of her and hovered there waiting for her order. "The filet of sole is very good this evening," he said encouragingly.

Wilma suppressed a faint sniff at that. It was a suggestion Joseph would never have made. He knew she didn't care for fish. But then, what difference did it make? Anything she ordered would taste like ashes in her mouth. So, "That will be fine," she said, just to dispose of the matter, to get rid of him. He must be new here. She'd never seen him before. And she didn't really like him much, with his bland, uncaring little smile.

Yet she was grateful now that it wasn't Joseph who was waiting on her tonight. Dear Joseph, who didn't miss a thing. He must have

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noted the two of them up there and her back here, must surely sense what she was going through. And the slightest hint of pity in his kind, knowing eyes might make her burst into tears.

Just the thought of it brought them perilously near the surface. To steady herself, Wilma grasped the drink in front of her, welcoming the solid feel of the cold glass. She took a sip, and then another. That was better. Truly a civilized, a civilizing custom. By the time she'd finished it, sip by ladylike sip, she had her feelings decently under control again.

Heartened by its calming effect, she ordered another when the waiter brought her dinner. It would also help her to stretch this meal out as long as possible, for she meant to outstay those two up there. Keeping that goal firmly in mind, Wilma picked daintily at her food and, between bites, took a leisurely sip or two of her drink.

It didn't go far that way and soon she had to order another, and then several more at intervals thereafter. Her waiter brought them promptly, earning an ever warmer smile from Wilma. He was rather a nice young man, after all. A trifle inexperienced perhaps, but so eager to please. She must leave him a good tip.

A good tip and a good sip and—then what . . . ? Ah, yes, a little bite of something. Wilma stabbed half-heartedly at her fish, but it kept slipping off the fork and she finally gave up and just let it lie there. She felt sad, but not unpleasantly so, and she couldn't clearly remember why.

Then, suddenly, the party at the table just ahead scraped back their chairs, rose and departed, leaving Wilma with a harshly unobstructed view of the source of her troubles.

Her grief returned tenfold, hitting her like a blow. And with no buffer of strangers between, she felt her humiliating position exposed now for all to see. Her cheeks grew hot at the thought of being thus the object of general scorn.

She strove, however, to maintain an outward calm, determined that if *he* happened to look around at her, he should find her quite unruffled. She took a nonchalant sip of her drink, spilling only a little.

But he chose, cravenly, to keep his back to her. Wilma fixed her gaze on it, as though her eyes might bore a hole in it, pierce his conscience, make him squirm.

She could hear their voices, too, now that the others had gone—no words, just a little conversational buzz, punctuated by occasional laughter.

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At the sound of it Wilma joined in quietly, bitterly. Why not? The joke was on her, wasn't it? He'd seen to that.

How, *how* could he have done such a thing? If he hadn't shown up at all, it would have been a disappointment—oh, yes, a grievous disappointment. But to bring that woman here, to *their* restaurant of all places, to flaunt her this way. Surely that was gratuitously cruel.

Wilma seemed to be having trouble keeping his back in focus. It had begun to shimmer slightly, to swim before her eyes. She couldn't understand why until a tear escaped down her cheek. Oh, God, no! She mustn't go to pieces. She mustn't let him see her cry.

In a panic she fumbled her purse open. As she groped blindly inside for a handkerchief, her hand touched, then closed around, her little revolver. She drew it out onto her lap and, through the blur of her tears, stared down at it, rather blankly at first. Then, slowly, laboriously, her brain made a connection. "A ladylike weapon for a lady to defend her honor with." Well. She had a use for it at last. Because he *had* dishonored her, shamed her in front of Joseph and all the rest, made her a laughing-stock.

Her heart pounding at her daring, Wilma gripped the revolver. Yet even in her befuddled state some flicker of cunning told her that if people saw what she was up to they'd try to stop her. So, feeling quite pleased with her cleverness, she shielded the weapon from the rest of the room with her napkin, and holding it close to her chest, took aim at his back—that indifferent, traitorous back—and squeezed the trigger.

It wouldn't budge. She tried again. And again and again. Then the sense of mission drained out of her and she let the useless thing drop back onto her lap. Spent and confused, she closed her eyes for a moment. And when she opened them again she saw how foolish she had been to believe anything so tiny could do any harm. It really was just a toy, after all.

But what a mean trick for Papa to play on her, making her think it was real all those years. Her eyes filled anew at this worst of all betrayals. Oh, Papa, even you . . .

No, wait, wasn't there something . . . ? The faint recollection stirred sluggishly—something Papa had showed her about the gun, long ago—about a—a—what did he call it? A—a safety! Yes, that was it. A little catch to keep the gun from going off accidentally. Now where was it? Oh, she wished she'd paid more attention when he explained it to her. But it must be here somewhere, it must. Papa

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wouldn't deceive her like that. Not Papa. Feverishly, Wilma bent her head to the search.

Joseph was by no means the only good waiter at Barlow's, but he was the acknowledged best. Senior among them, he was an example to the others, he kept them up to standard. It was he who set the unhurried, caring tone of the place, which was the one clear advantage Barlow's offered over the encroaching fast-food chains; the only reason, in fact, it was still holding its own in their midst. What would become of Barlow's when Joseph—the backbone, the very heart and soul of the enterprise—retired was something the manager preferred not to think about. Fortunately, that was unlikely to happen soon, for Joseph truly loved his work.

It could even be argued that he took rather more on himself than he should. Officious was perhaps too strong a word, but Joseph did have a distinctly proprietary attitude toward the following he'd acquired at Barlow's, those regular patrons who always chose a table in the section of the restaurant he was assigned to serve. He fussed over them like a mother hen, learned their names and habits, and did his utmost to cater to their preferences, often deftly guiding a party of newcomers away from a favored table to keep it free for one of "his own." Because that was the way he had come to regard them, and the feeling certainly seemed to be mutual.

So you can imagine Joseph's surprise and chagrin this evening to see one of the most faithful of his regulars, Miss DeLand, sail right past him and seat herself beyond the bounds of his jurisdiction. For a second, in fact, he could not quite believe it had happened. Miss DeLand was a creature of such unswerving habit. She came to Barlow's exactly once a week, always on Wednesday, always before 7:00 and always—without fail—sat at the same table, just across the aisle from the amiable Mr. Turner, who also dined here on Wednesday since he had a once-a-week business meeting in the neighborhood.

But Joseph could not deny the evidence of his own eyes. There was Mr. Turner at *his* usual table with the guest he'd brought tonight, while across the narrow aisle Miss DeLand's table stood empty, and Miss DeLand herself . . . Joseph sighed and cast a reproachful look at the defector. And though he was not a vindictive man, he saw a certain wry justice in the fact that she had inadvertently sat down at one of Harvey's tables. She'd get nothing like her accustomed service *there*. Young Harvey, well-meaning though

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he was, had been with Barlow's a mere two days. Well—Joseph shrugged—on her head be it. He had plenty of loyal diners in his own station to attend to.

And he never missed a beat as he went about taking their orders and serving their meals, yet all the while a corner of his mind kept pondering the whys and wherefores of Miss DeLand's unprecedented action. Come to think of it, there had been another slight departure from her routine this evening. She'd come in after 7:00 instead of before. Joseph remembered now because Mr. Turner and his guest were already here and had, in fact, placed their orders by the time she arrived. Mr. Turner had even commented on her absence. "Where's our blue-eyed friend tonight?" he asked. Miss DeLand had notably blue eyes, her best feature; really her only good feature. But Joseph could not for the life of him see how her being a little late would account for her rude behavior once she'd got here.

The unwarranted affront still stung. And she was the last person Joseph would have expected it from. Of all his flock, Miss DeLand had seemed most appreciative—and most in need—of his very special attentions: a proud lady of obvious refinement living in sadly reduced circumstances.

Oh, yes, his keen eye had quickly caught the signs of that. Her clothes were good and always well brushed and pressed, but they were far from new, even a bit frayed here and there. Her weekly dinner at Barlow's was almost certainly the one luxury she could manage; was, Joseph sometimes feared, the only full meal she had all week. He had often observed her slipping into her purse the extra rolls from the basket on her table.

All the more reason then to indulge her prideful little affectations—the genteel harking back to more gracious times, the gallant pretense that the more expensive dishes on the menu simply didn't agree with her. Joseph sighed just to think of it. Poor, proud, foolish Miss DeLand! And his pique at the snub she had dealt him was quite swallowed up in concern for how she was faring at the hands of the neophyte Harvey. Joseph could not properly interfere, of course; it would never do to trespass on another waiter's territory. But he kept an anxious eye on her as he went his busy rounds.

And with every glance her way his uneasiness about her grew. She was not herself, that much was clear. She was sitting so rigidly erect, staring so fixedly in front of her, almost glassy-eyed. Indeed, if it had been anyone but Miss DeLand, he'd have said she was slightly intoxicated.

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The very idea made Joseph smile a little as he recalled the ladylike ritual she made of her "one drink before dinner"; a family tradition, she always felt obliged to explain. Yet—his smile faded—something was decidedly amiss with her. Why was she holding her napkin up in that odd way? And her face looked so flushed. Perhaps she was ill, running a fever, a bit out of her head. For she was behaving very strangely, scrabbling about now at something in her lap.

He must alert Harvey. Joseph scanned the room in search of the other waiter, but he was nowhere to be seen. Where was the young scamp? Out back sneaking a cigarette, very likely. Well. Rules or no rules, if Harvey wasn't on hand to look after his customer, Joseph must do it for him. He made a quick check of his own charges to see that they were in need of nothing for the moment. Then he left his station and approached the distraught woman.

"Miss DeLand, are you all right?" he inquired gently.

She looked up, her eyes unnaturally bright and not quite in focus, and Joseph got the unsettling impression she did not really recognize him. She seemed glad to see him, though. She smiled at him, happy as a child, and, as though giving him the best of good news, announced, "I found it! I knew Papa wouldn't lie to me." Oh, definitely she was ill. Delirious perhaps.

"That's fine," Joseph began soothingly.

But she paid no attention to him. "Now it will work," she said. "You see?"

She held up something in her hand—why, it looked like a toy gun!—and squeezed the trigger to show him.

And she was right. This time it fired.

Dear Joseph died instantly. Barlow's lingered on a while, but not for long. The loss of its heart and soul proved a mortal blow to the establishment.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Uncle Abner story by

JOHN F. SUTER

"Justice is a thing of God, sent down to be dispensed by men who try to measure mortal frailty against the will of God. Law is its chief component, whether that law is divine or written by man." Do you recognize the tone? It is the voice of that Early American champion of justice, Uncle Abner, the "protector of the innocent and righter of wrongs," the "arm of the Lord"—stalwart, rugged, honest, God-fearing Uncle Abner, Virginia squire of the Jeffersonian era . . .

THE SHADES OF DEATH

by JOHN F. SUTER

It was the only road of its kind ever constructed wholly by the government of the United States. It was called the National Road, and it stretched first from Cumberland, in Maryland, through western Pennsylvania to Wheeling, in western Virginia, then later to Vandalia, in Illinois. It opened the frontier to development as nothing else had done.

It was also, in places, a peril to the unwary traveler, who stood to lose either his property or his life. The Indians were gone, but the savages were not. Abner had been warned against traveling alone as he made his way west toward Wheeling from Baltimore. He replied simply that he was never alone and went on his way.

It was after he had descended the western side of Little Savage Mountain in western Maryland that his confidence was put to the test.

He was in a giant's steeplechase of great mountains, narrow valleys, and turbulent streams, and dark had come upon him before he had reached the tavern where he intended to sleep.

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The night sky was pale with the blaze of stars, but as Abner's great horse went forward, a thousand ragged fingers against the sky began to obscure the glow. It was not long before it was completely black overhead, and Abner sensed that he was in an immense grove of trees. From the scent in his nostrils, he knew they were pines.

He had heard that this was a twilight place by day and blacker than the night after sundown.

Yet the gloom was not absolute. A short distance ahead a fire was flickering by the side of the road.

Abner rode on until he had almost reached the fire, on his right. Suddenly a dark figure stepped from the opposite side and stood squarely in his path.

"Pull up," a harsh voice said.

Abner reined in the great chestnut. "By whose authority?" he demanded.

The man before him lifted a rifle. "The best authority anywhere."

In the flickering light cast by the fire Abner could see that the muzzle of the rifle was not pointed at him. It was aimed between the eyes of his horse.

"Very well," he said.

"Get down," growled the man with the gun.

Abner dismounted carefully.

"I'll take your gun," said the man in the road.

Abner handed over his own rifle. In a sudden flare of the fire he could see a grin on a bearded face.

"What now?" he asked.

"Go over to the fire," the other man said. "I'll bring your friend." He suddenly gave a piercing whistle.

When Abner reached the fire, he saw a second man seated by it on a log. This man was drinking from an earthen mug. He stopped after finishing a swallow and spoke around the rim of the mug.

"Who's this come to visit?" he asked the man with the gun.

"I'll leave that to you to find out," the first man said. "Get his papers and look."

"Who are you, friend?" the man on the log asked, setting the mug beside him.

"I would tell anyone who is qualified to ask," Abner replied. "I doubt that you are."

The man at the fire stood up with assurance. "Oh, I think we are. Your papers."

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Abner hesitated. The man with the gun hawked and spat. "You still need a horse."

Without a word Abner handed over his note case. The second man took it and removed the contents quickly.

"Could be we could make us a little money easy, if we go over him good," he remarked to his partner. He examined everything in turn. "Sold a bunch of cattle in Baltimore, huh?"

He looked up. "You know what came our way? A western Virginia snake-eater!"

Both of Abner's ambushers laughed loudly.

"You would be Pennsylvanians, then," Abner said evenly.

"Gave ourselves away, did we?" the second man said. "Not that it matters. Here."

He had stuffed Abner's documents and paper money into the note case. He handed it back.

"You needn't worry about your money," he said. "You come from the direction of Cumberland. Where you bound—Wheeling?"

"Yes," said Abner, "but not tonight. I had hoped to reached Tomlinson's, at Little Meadows."

Although the man at the fire seemed more relaxed, his partner was not. His gun was still aimed at the horse.

"You might or might not make it," he said. "There are things to be done here before we can turn you loose. Where's the stage?"

"No stage is coming through from the east tonight," Abner said.

"How do you know? Are you a company agent?" asked the first man.

"I am only a traveler," Abner replied. "What is this place?"

There was no grin on the first man's face. "We are on the edge of the Shades of Death."

"I had thought so," said Abner. "A notorious area. There were massacres here, they tell me. They also tell me that stagecoaches are often plundered in this place."

"So they say," growled the man with the gun.

"There will be no stage tonight," said Abner, "because the eastbound coach was waylaid last night in this area. It was not a good trap, for the driver crashed through the barricade. He and the four passengers escaped unharmed."

The second man listened carefully. "What has that to do with today's westbound stage?"

"Shots were fired, and the guardsman was killed. He was to return from Cumberland today, but there is no replacement yet."

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The man with the gun nodded. "And they won't try it without a guard."

He spoke to Abner. "One of us may be all we need to watch the road, then. Come along."

He took a pine knot from the fire and gestured to Abner to lead his horse.

"Go on," he said. "The way you were heading."

They proceeded in silence for several minutes until the road rounded a small bend. The light of a larger fire showed through the trees, and voices could be heard.

Finally, as he and his guard approached the second fire, Abner could see three wagons drawn up in an open area beside the road. Two men stood beside the fire talking. A third man was lashed to a tree, his hands behind him around the trunk.

The wagons were not all alike. Two were of the Conestoga type commonly used to haul cargoes over the road. The third was a covered flat-bed farm vehicle. A six-horse team was hitched to each of the three.

The men by the fire stopped talking and looked up as Abner and his captor came toward them.

"That you, Reese?" one of them called. "Who's with you?"

"A man from western Virginia," Abner's companion answered. "On his way to Tomlinson's, he said. It could be true."

"He'll be a little late gettin' there," the questioner remarked. "We can use him. He can spread the word about what we'll do to sharpshooters from now on."

"He says there'll be no stage this way tonight," Reese said. He repeated Abner's information.

The two men by the fire were dressed warmly, but differently. One, a short burly man with a straggly beard, wore buckskins and a knitted cap of gray wool. The other, who had done the talking, wore dark woolen trousers, a navy-blue woolen hunting shirt, and a large cape trimmed in red. On his head was a wide-brimmed yellow hat. Both men wore much-used boots reaching nearly to their knees.

The man in the yellow hat addressed Abner. "Is it true what Reese says?"

"That was the talk in Cumberland when I left," Abner replied.

"And the guard was killed? That's bad."

"It is thought that he was killed," Abner said. "The driver saw him fall from the seat while the shots were being fired. He did not run after the stage."

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"Even if he wasn't killed when he fell, the bandits wouldn't let him live to tell about it," the man in the hat remarked. "Especially if they hadn't got anything."

He pulled a long thin object from beneath his cape and held it out to Abner.

"Stogie?"

When Abner declined the smoke, the man put it into his own mouth.

He pulled a burning twig from the fire and lit the cigar. The light of the flame showed a clean-shaven raw-boned face. Its most noticeable feature was a large nose which had been broken and reset slightly to the left.

"Dillon, better see if the tar's thin enough," he said to the man in buckskins.

Abner looked around. A large copper kettle was set on stones at one side of the fire, with some of the shorter burning stubs beneath it. A smell of pine tar drifted across his nostrils momentarily.

Dillon thrust a stick into the kettle and withdrew it. The end was dark and gummy.

"Not runny enough yet, Owen," he said.

"It will be, in time," the man in the hat said. He turned to Abner. "When that happens, you'll see some justice done."

"Whose justice will that be?" asked Abner.

The man before him drew on his tobacco. He laughed. "Wagoners' justice."

Abner addressed him in an even tone. "Justice is a thing of God, sent down to be dispensed by men who try to measure mortal frailty against the will of God. Law is its chief component, whether that law is divine or written by man. What law has he broken?"

"The law of survival," the wagoner answered.

"Whose survival?"

"Ours."

Abner made no answer. He stood straight as one of the tall pines surrounding them on all sides. He faced the man, Owen, with a steady stare.

"You doubt me?" the wagoner demanded. "There are four of us here, Dillon, Reese, Hamilton—up the road—and me. We work hard at what we do. We're out in all kinds of weather, haulin' the freight over these mountains. We earn every fipenny bit we get.

"Now, these farmers up and down the road: when freight rates are low, you never see a one of them haulin'. Not one. But let the

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rates go up, and they turn up like maggots in fly time. They get to the commission house before we do, and they make more miles a day than we do. Sharpshooters, people call 'em. What I call 'em is something else!"

He crooked a finger at Abner. "Let me show you something."

With Abner following, he walked to one of the Conestogas. He stopped by one of the wheels and rapped the iron with his knuckles.

"Mark the width of that tread," he said. "A good four inches. Makes a good sturdy wheel. More important, it spreads the load on the stone base of the road."

He moved away and walked to the flat-bed farm wagon. Again he stopped by a wheel and rapped the iron.

"Here's your sure mark of a sharpshooter—a narrow rim. Not so much drag on the wheel, but it works on the stone base of the road like all the imps of hell pounding with sledgehammers."

"Is that your evidence, then?" asked Abner. "The width of a wagon wheel?"

Owen grinned without humor. "No, by God! There's more, and I'll show you when the time comes!"

"It would seem then that the man needs someone to defend him," Abner said.

"You can have that task," Owen answered. "But I know how it'll end. The tar'll be thin enough soon. We have no feathers, but there're more than enough pine needles."

He started to walk toward the fire. Over his shoulder he remarked, "We were a little short on tar, but we made it up from this one's own tar pot." He laughed. "If his wheels get dry at the hub, he can always scrape some off himself and use that."

"Some of his own tar, did you say?" Abner asked.

"I did," Owen answered, laughing again. "We wouldn't want to do part of a job, would we?"

Abner looked over at the man tied to the tree. "I see no harm in freeing him," he said.

The broken-nosed man studied him. "And if he breaks away?"

Abner was already striding toward the tree. "I offer myself in his place."

None of the three wagoners made any move to interfere as Abner went up to the captive.

The man was dressed all in plain gray wool, except for a pair of boots which seemed newer than those the wagoners wore. His head drooped forward on his chest. The wide farm hat that he wore had

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slipped down to his eyes, making it difficult to see his features.

Abner removed the hat. He noticed that a bandanna had been stuffed around the inner rim. The cloth was soaked with sweat.

"Look up," he said to the captive, "and have no fear. I intend to speak for you."

The bound man raised his head. His fleshy face was bordered with thin sidewhiskers. His eyes were wide. His dark hair was matted and damp.

"Your intentions are good," he said to Abner in a hoarse undertone, "but it might be better to let them tar me and get it over with."

"Why do you say that?" Abner asked in surprise.

"How do you know that this is not the gang that tried to ambush the stage? Tarring is the least of what they might do."

Abner pondered this. "They have shown no signs of that. Why do you think this might be true?"

"Because I came through here with my wagon, heading east, just after the stage escaped. I pulled in and hid behind some of the smaller growth as the gang rode off."

Disbelief was written on Abner's face. "They rode away in Conestogas?"

"No, but they could have left the wagons somewhere to the west while they came to ambush the stage."

"I see," said Abner. "What is your name?"

"Nathaniel Grimm. I'm a farmer."

Abner gripped his shoulder. "I came to untie you, Grimm. See that you don't run away."

Grimm turned his head as Abner walked around the tree. "I have four small mouths to feed beside my wife's and mine. Be careful what you do!"

Abner made no reply, but busied himself with the rope. It was skillfully knotted and did not come free easily, but at last it yielded.

He leaned down to take the last turns from Grimm's wrists. "It would be wise to rub your hands when they are loose," he said.

As the rope came free, he grasped one of Grimm's hands. It was plump and sweaty, and the skin felt slippery and cold, either from the night air or from diminished blood supply.

"Look to your hands, Grimm," he said, gathering the rope.

He walked in front of Grimm again and picked up the hat. The bandanna fell out as he did so. He stuffed the bandanna into Grimm's right hip pocket and started to set the hat on the man's head. Grimm stopped rubbing his hands and took the hat.

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"My head's too wet," he said. "I'll let it dry before I put this on."

Abner led Grimm to the fire, facing the three wagoners.

"Now," he said to Owen, "before I speak for this man, you must know two things. First, the Northwestern Turnpike goes through the area where I live. I know about sharpshooters, although I have never been one. Second, I am a farmer, myself."

"You stating a bias, are you?" Owen asked.

"No," said Abner. "I want you to know that I am not acting out of ignorance."

"Fair enough," said Owen. "To show you that we are not doin' that either, I suggest that you look at the contents of his wagon."

Abner gestured to Grimm to be seated on a pine stump near the fire. He walked to the flat-bed wagon and drew back the canvas cover. The man in buckskins appeared beside him, holding a blazing pine knot for light.

The cargo in the wagon was a mixed lot. Nearly half of it was shingles. The rest was an assortment of kegs of cut nails, several copper kettles, a variety of kitchen utensils, a bale marked calico which felt as though it contained a number of bolts of material, and six large boxes marked Oysters. A shovel was wedged against the side of the wagon, its blade damp and dirt-stained and containing a blotch of gum with some pine needles sticking to it. A pewter mug crusted with dried residue of cherry wine was thrust into a space between some of the nail kegs.

Abner looked at everything. Nothing in the cargo seemed unusual. The lid of the top Oyster box was not fastened tightly. It could be raised easily, as though Grimm had been helping himself at stops. Some strands of wool were caught on projections of the sideboards, but Abner had not expected to find a meticulously clean interior.

He replaced the canvas and walked to the front of the wagon. The six horses stood quietly, covered against the chill by bearskin capes. Abner looked at each animal in turn, observing its condition. All appeared to be well-tended.

One beast, the right wheel-horse, had a pair of saddlebags over its back. Abner opened these. Each one had a collection of small items for a woman and children. Some paper money and coins were in the bottom of both.

Abner closed the bags and replaced the cape on the horse. He walked back to the fire, where the wagoners and their captive waited. "Owen," he said, "I think you will save your tar. However, state your case."

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The man in the yellow hat removed the stogie from his mouth and pointed it at Grimm.

"My case is his story, and I'll let him tell it. You—what do you say you are, and where are you from?"

Grimm looked at Abner. "I'm a farmer, and I'm from north of Grantsville, between this road and the one farther north that runs to Pittsburgh."

"What are you doin' over here?"

Grimm swallowed. "I took a load of whiskey—my own—to Cumberland and sold it. Then I bought a wagonload of stuff we needed or wanted and started back. I met up with you at this place."

"Wait," said Abner. "Where is Grantsville? How far is it from Cumberland?"

"It's just west of here, in Maryland," Owen answered. "From where he says he lives, it might be around twenty-five miles. His road turns off just before Grantsville." He smiled coldly at Abner. "That was a good question—for us."

He addressed Grimm again.

"When did you leave home?"

"About two yesterday afternoon. I kept going until I came to Tomlinson's. I stopped there and watered the team some. I went in for a mug or two and a bit of food, then I moved on."

"And you came to the Shades of Death just after the holdup failed," said Abner.

Grimm closed his eyes and slumped forward. He had been gaining confidence, but it deserted him again.

Owen spat into the fire. "He didn't tell us that, by God!"

"Would it change your thinking?" Abner asked.

"Yes, but not in the way you hope."

The wagoner stared at the prisoner. "So your story, then, is that you came through here—when?"

Grimm choked, then managed to speak. "Early dark. It was hard to tell in here. You know that. And I didn't see anybody—to make out who they were, that is."

"Didn't you, now!" Owen said. "What you saw or didn't see is no concern of mine. But you say that you took a wagonload of whiskey from here over Little Savage, then Big Savage, then down by Braddock's Run and Wills Creek into Cumberland. By night. Then you sold your whiskey, loaded up, and came this far before dark today."

"I did."

Owen snorted. "Nobody, not even a sharpshooter, could do what

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you claim. I say you did something different, and I'll prove it before we're through."

Reese no longer held the gun on Abner's horse. He cut into the conversation. "Owen, he could have done it."

"I did do it," said Grimm. "I unhitched at Coonrod's, on Big Savage, gave the team a little feed, and got a short nap. I got up again, hitched up, and went on." As an afterthought he said, "I was lighter by one keg. Coonrod's bought it."

Owen glared first at Reese, then at Grimm. "I thought I'd have to prove this to just one man. But if I have to do it for every man in these parts, I will!"

He reached under his cape and brought out a folded paper.

He handed Abner the paper. "Open that and read it."

Abner took the document close to the fire and read it carefully.

"Well?" rasped Owen.

"It seems to be a receipt, made out to Nathaniel Grimm," said Abner.

"Yes, from McKaig and Maquire's in Cumberland. That's a commission house," said Owen. "But is it for whiskey?"

"No," said Abner, "it listed 5000 pounds of wool, at two dollars and a half a hundred for hauling."

"You see," said Owen. "He lied. He claims whiskey, but the receipt says wool. And we got that right out of the wagon, stuck in the bottom of a nest of kitchen pots."

"This proves nothing," said Abner.

"What do you mean?" demanded Owen.

"The date is a year old."

Owen stepped to Abner's side and snatched the paper. He studied it, then thrust it back at Grimm.

"Very well," he said. "I'll grant you the date. But he could have been sharpshooting more than once, I say. Now, I'll tell you what I think about your Nathaniel Grimm. He probably is a farmer. All the sharpshooters I've ever met are. But he doesn't live where he says he does. He lives farther west, at least beyond Uniontown. In spite of you and Reese, I say he couldn't have done what he says he did in the time he had."

Owen once more recounted the territory Grimm claimed to have covered, pointing out that it was mountainous, with many steep grades. He also pointed out that a heavy front the night before would have made the road surface slippery and difficult, especially for a lone driver, even if he walked by the left-front wheel, as was common

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in difficult situations. He launched into a discussion of braking methods for a heavy cargo such as whiskey. All of this, he said, would have slowed Grimm too much for the time interval.

"I'll just call your attention to two things," he said to Abner. "Then I'll shut up. You looked in the wagon. You saw six boxes of oysters, I know. Maybe you also saw a pewter mug with wine stains on it."

"I saw all of that," said Abner.

"Good. Those are the things which give him the lie, even if you think he could have done everything he claims. The oysters—do you think a farmer and his family will eat six big boxes of oysters before they spoil, even if they are salted? A man and his wife and four small kids? They'd be sick of 'em before they'd be through two boxes. But there's a big hotel in Uniontown that sells every oyster they can get, as fast as they can be supplied. Uniontown's a good distance beyond where he says he lives. So he's running for business, not for himself."

"I was not aware of this," Abner conceded.

Owen touched a finger to the brim of his yellow hat.

"You are an honest man, then. This thing might work out as we want without an argument."

"It might," said Abner, "but you have still not produced a critical, unarguable fact."

Owen's face showed extreme unbelief. "An unarguable fact? Do you live by a thirty-hour clock? I tell you, you and this rascal had better live by one, for one's needed to account for what I'm about to say!"

"Say it, then," said Abner.

"You say you saw the pewter mug with the wine stains," Owen said, with a sardonic grin. "You'll not deny the stains ain't old and crusty?"

"They seemed fresh," Abner agreed.

"They were! And there's only one place on this road that has pewter mugs—Cherney's. It's on the east slope of Big Savage, between here and Cumberland.

"Now, if there's a pewter mug in that wagon, and it has fresh wine stains on it, that means this conniving rascal stopped there sometime this afternoon to lift a mug or two, and rest his team, as well. That would cut his time on the road even more."

"It would," Abner agreed.

"Add it up, then," Owen said triumphantly. "He has to start farther west, to get that order for oysters he's to deliver. This means

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that he's not even close to here when the stage was ambushed. He came through here a lot earlier, and he heard about it in Cumberland before he started back. He hoped he could use it to change his times and places if he ran into anybody like us. We just saw through it, and he won't get away with it."

He stopped and stared at Abner. "I don't hear you interrupting in his defense."

Abner's voice was not contentious when he answered. "You overlooked something, Owen."

Owen eyed him with suspicion. "What?"

"The tar pot. No farmer would set out on a trip longer than the one Grimm says he was making unless he carried a full tar pot, to make sure his wheels were greased."

Owen's look of surprise changed slowly to a broad grin. "We do the same. His tar pot was full, too. But," he said, "you go against yourself. It's a point for us."

"No," said Abner, and it was clear that he was certain and unswerving, "I told you that he is innocent of what you think, and he is."

"But everything about that wagon says he's guilty!"

Abner faced Owen as Moses might have faced Pharaoh. "You reason well, Owen, but you could only convict the wagon. You have not built a case against the man."

Owen's mouth opened in surprise and bafflement, but he said nothing.

"You have made a serious mistake," Abner went on. "You can be pardoned for some of it, for you and I had not yet met when you first built your theory. All the same, you have let timetables and the complexities of freight hauling blind you. You have forgotten two fundamental things."

"Not if they have to do with driving wagons!" Owen retorted.

"One of them is more universal," Abner said. "The other is a primary thing in your work."

The wagoner hurled the remnant of his stogie into the fire. "I don't believe it. Name it."

"How to handle a wagon."

Owen laughed scornfully. "Reese—Dillon—you hear that? You think I've forgot how to handle a wagon?"

The other two wagoners chuckled in derision. "Tar oughta be hot enough, now," Dillon smirked. "Looks like we'll be a-usin' it."

Abner resumed speaking, as though he had the agreement of his

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audience. "The wagon's story is false, as I have said. However, I believe that one thing in it points to truth, and another might reveal the complete truth."

"What thing in it do you accept?" demanded Owen.

"The shovel."

"The shovel? To dig the wheels out of the mud or throw gravel on a slick spot? Show me what good it is in proving this man's not deserving of being tarred!"

"I will," said Abner, "but first I must point out to you one of the two things you have forgotten: did you investigate to determine that he is Nathaniel Grimm?"

"There's things in the wagon with his name on 'em," Owen replied.

"And in the saddlebags," said Reese.

"Again, you are judging the wagon and the trappings, not the man," Abner said. "Nathaniel Grimm might well be a sharpshooting farmer who lives and operates from somewhere near Uniontown, on the basis of what the wagon says. But this is not Grimm."

"Who is he, then? His partner?" Owen asked.

"I think not," Abner replied. "Grimm's partner would be a farmer or a wagoner. This man is neither."

"The shovel told you that, did it?" Owen snorted.

"No," said Abner, "the shovel hints at something which is yet to be proven."

"What would that be?"

"That you should forget tarring a competitor. That, instead, you should deliver a murderer to justice."

Consternation was plain on every face except Abner's.

"He killed somebody? Who?" Reese asked.

"I believe he killed Nathaniel Grimm," Abner answered. "I believe he waylaid Grimm near this spot, killed him, and buried the body. The dirt on the shovel is still damp, and the blade has pine gum and needles clinging to it."

"A case could be made against that," Owen remarked. "Let's hear the rest of it. Who is he? Why should he kill Grimm?"

"I believe him to be the stage guard," Abner said. "He fell from his seat during the ambush, I was told. Suppose he had been entrusted with a sum of money to deliver? There was talk of that in Cumberland, but it was not known for a certainty. If he were a scoundrel, he might have pretended to be shot, in order to disappear with the money."

"There was still the gang to avoid," Owen pointed out.

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"That is true," Abner admitted. "I could not tell you how that was done, unless he escaped while the rascals were trying to catch the stage. A dead or wounded guard would not concern them. Live and moneyed passengers would."

"Y'say he killed Grimm," Reese said.

Abner nodded. "I believe that. He would have done it to get the wagon or, at the very least, a horse. He had to get away from here with his money."

Owen turned to the man in buckskins. "Dillon, you still got his gun?"

Dillon reached into his shirt. "I do." He drew out a pistol and handed it to Owen.

Owen passed the weapon to Abner. "We would have returned it after we'd finished with him."

Abner sniffed the barrel of the pistol.

"It has been fired recently."

"I noticed that," Owen agreed, "but that could mean anything. The only money we found was that little bit in the saddlebags. If he stole money, where is it?"

"It is certainly hidden," Abner said, "but not too well hidden."

"You seem pretty sure of that," Owen retorted.

"I am," Abner said. "When I first talked to this man, he begged me to let you tar him. He feared that you and these others were the gang who ambushed the stage. I believe that he spoke what he thought was truth. He was willing to accept shame and mild torture to distract you from looking too closely at his things. What would that gang have done if they had found the money?"

Owen stood straight before Abner, and his eyes gleamed on either side of his bent nose. "He could be right. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," said Abner. "I also remembered that your men touched not a penny of my own money."

Owen touched his yellow hat again. "A fair man, that you are. Well, then, if his money is not well hidden, where is it?"

Abner made no answer. Instead, he strode to the flat-bed wagon, reached inside, and grasped one of the oyster boxes. With one smooth heave he lifted it out.

As Abner was carrying the box to the light of the fire, the man in buckskins saw what he had done. He walked to one of the Conestogas and opened the box beneath the driver's seat. He removed an iron pry bar and handed it to Abner.

Abner thanked him. "The box has already been opened," he said,

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"and it should be easier to reopen." He set the bar between the lid and the side and applied leverage.

There was a groan of nails, and the lid came free. Abner lifted the box and emptied the contents to the ground beside the fire. A heap of oysters and salt built up. Abner raked this heap with his foot.

A leather bag, closed tightly with a drawstring, emerged from the midst of the oysters.

Abner lifted the bag and set it on the end of the box. He carefully undid the string and spread the neck of the bag. Then he tipped it and poured out the contents slowly.

A shining pile of gold coins glistened by the light of the fire.

The three drivers crowded around.

"Double eagles," Reese breathed.

"More'n two hundred, I'd guess," Dillon said.

"At least four thousand dollars, then," Owen concluded. "That would seem to show you're right, mister."

He stood for several minutes, thinking. "Closest place to a sheriff is on west of here, at Grantsville. We can put him in his wagon and let Hamilton come back in here and drive it to Tomlinson's, with you. Let him leave you and this murdering rat and the money there while he goes for the sheriff. The rest of us will stay here and look for the body."

There was a sudden movement. The prisoner thrust himself forward. "Wait!" he shouted. "Now you are mistaken."

Everyone paused and stared at the fleshy man.

"You were right the first time," he said excitedly. "I am a farmer. I am a sharpshooter now and then. I admit it."

"And the money?" Owen demanded.

"I have had a bank account in Cumberland. I closed it out, and I'm taking the money to a bank in Uniontown."

There was silence as the group considered this statement.

Finally Owen looked at Abner. "What do you think? It could be true. Do we turn him over to the sheriff and let him find the truth about this, or do we give this one his tarring and let him go?"

In his excitement the prisoner had let his hat fall. Abner picked it up.

"I find it strange, Owen," he said in severe tones, "that we have a man before us who claims a wealth of gold. Yet he must be a poor man, for he cannot afford to buy his own hat."

Before the prisoner could protest, Abner set the hat on the man's

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head. It was too large, and it slipped down until it rested on his ears.

"There is no bandanna in it now to make it fit," said Abner.

"He had lost his hat, and he took one from Grimm's body!" exclaimed Owen.

"Yes," said Abner, "and if you still doubt that he is not Grimm, I remind you that you have forgotten the bitterest lesson of driving wagons."

"I have forgotten nothing about driving a wagon," retorted Owen.

"You have, indeed," said Abner. "If you had not, you would never have held this man for a sharpshooter. Look at his hands. Feel them. They are fat, and the flesh is smooth and soft. Where are the calluses? Where, at the very least, are the blisters which come from handling the reins? He does not drive wagons.

"These are not the hands of Esau. They are the hands of Jacob!"

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The little man was ashen-faced now . . .

BLUE NOTE

by T. M. ADAMS

He was a clerkish-looking man, with the air of having been defeated without knowing it; if he had dreams left, they would probably be grandiose, quite beyond his ability to realize. Mara Bonestell thought she could read all this on his face as he came to the head of the line. She smiled across the counter and said, "May I help you?" He smiled back nervously, glanced from side to side, and passed her a small note on stiff blue paper. She unfolded it gingerly. It read: *You don't know me very well, but I'm crazy about you. I've just come into some money, and I'd like to offer you dinner to celebrate. How about it?*

Mara found it hard to cover her embarrassment. Know him very well? She'd never seen him before this week, when—she suddenly realized—he had taken to drifting in every day, just looking around . . . looking at her, perhaps. He seemed so wretchedly nervous she decided to let him down gently.

"I'm very sorry," she said in a soft voice. "I simply can't."

His smile froze. "Can't?" he murmured.

"Sorry," she said, folding the note neatly and putting it in her purse.

"Look, uh . . . I'm not kidding about this thing. I . . . I really mean it."

"I'm sure you do," she said sympathetically. "But it's strictly against bank policy. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Well, sure, but—"

"And if I broke the rules for you, I'd have to break them for everyone who asked, wouldn't I?"

The little man was ashen-faced now, and a few beads of sweat showed just below his hair-line. He made a strangled little noise.

Mara felt terrible. "Look, don't take it so hard. It's no crime just to ask. I mean, I'm not going to call the police or anything."

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He swallowed audibly. "You . . . you're not?"

"No, no, of course not," she said quickly. "But you'll have to go now, before another line forms. And please don't feel—you know—that you have to change banks or something. No hard feelings. And we still want your business."

"Oh, all right," he said finally, and he walked out of the bank, hunching his shoulders, looking neither left nor right, a baffled and frustrated expression on his face. When the lunch hour ended, he entered a large office building and took an elevator to the fourth floor, a domain of desks and cubicles where typewriters and calculators clattered and rang.

He strode purposefully toward one corner of the room. An observer would have seen on his face the same look of scared determination with which he had approached the bank teller earlier. His destination was a switchboard operated by a honey-blond girl in a tight pink sweater. "Hello, Lurlene," he said. She glanced at him briefly, still transferring calls, and said, "Oh, hello Larry . . . er, Louis." He pulled a second folded blue note from his pocket and left it on her desk. "For you," he managed to say, and moved on hurriedly to his own cubicle. He sat there re-ordering files, an expression of repressed excitement on his face.

A few minutes later Lurlene stalked over to him and flung the note in his face. "You must be crazy," she said contemptuously. "What do you think I am, a charitable institution?" With a swish of her hips she left him there.

For long moments the only motion he made was a slight humiliated trembling. Then he straightened himself and listlessly unfolded the crumpled piece of paper. But when he saw which note he'd given Lurlene he gave a violent start; it read: *Please assemble eight packets of hundred dollar bills and give them to me in a small-change bag. I have plans for this money, so do what I say. I am a desperate man.*

He stared at the note for about five seconds, then said, "Oh."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOHN C. BOLAND

"The fields and fence, sketched in the blues of starlight, suggested an unearthly cold. But even that hardly accounted for his suspicion that the painting hid something bizarre, something evil afoot."

Mr. Boland grows in style and substance, and in versatility . . .

EVOCATION OF EVIL

by JOHN C. BOLAND

Stoner's exile at the mountain resort had stretched to six days when he noticed the painting. It hung in a jam-packed lounge called the B'ar's Den at the edge of the village, where a noisy mob of skiers gathered to trade lies over dinner. What fastened Max Stoner's eye wasn't the scene—standard bucolic fare: a misty barnyard with a befuddled-looking cow—but the immaculate brushwork and the color. The artist had learned his draftsmanship under a demanding master. And he had conjured, from pigments and linseed oil, the precise gray-yellow light that seemed to pervade these winter-deadened hills.

Stoner, who had fled from New York to work on his own canvases, felt a twinge of professional jealousy.

"Good, huh?" said the bartender.

Stoner put on an indifferent mask. "The artist's local?"

"Born and reared right here in Whistle."

Stoner brusquely detached a ski hero's elbow from his ribs and leaned closer to the bar. The lower-right corner of the canvas bore a splashy blue legend: *Webster Lewis*. The fellow dropped all his discipline in claiming credit.

Stoner dined on country pot roast near the crackling stone fire-

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place, vaguely aware that the clamorous mating ritual had softened to a murmur. The local artist had a thoroughly professional technique—you had to grant him that—but he ranked a lot closer to a calendar or greeting-card illustrator than to an original artist. Stoner was pretty certain that *Palette Monthly*'s resident critic back in New York would second him on that. And when you came right down to it, art was whatever the trendsetters said it was. The old gasbag at *Palette*, a failed imitator of Matisse, had a soft spot for Stoner's garish abstracts.

He stumbled on another Webster Lewis the next day, dominating the tiny lobby of the Farmers & Merchants Bank. It showed a cupboard-lined farmhouse kitchen and two figures. One was a pale woman in a red scarf, the other a blue-suited, hawk-faced man. He must be the friendly village banker. Stoner thought that the Farmers & Merchants should have demanded some retouching, because Blue Suit looked as though he were about to foreclose.

The grimness of the style reminded Stoner of the bleak Post Office murals done in the thirties by—what was his name? Stoner shrugged and cashed his check.

He bought a few groceries and hiked a half mile back along the snow-caked road to the cottage he had rented at the edge of the village. Another good storm, some of the locals said, and they would have to close the ski slopes for fear of avalanche. That sounded fine to Stoner; in four nights' pursuit he had found the ski bunnies who hung out at the B'ar's Den immune to his limited fame. But the locals also mentioned the winter of '73, when the only way of getting from house to house was on snowshoes—and when the state plows hadn't opened the road to the highway for three days.

He spent the afternoon finishing a canvas provisionally titled "Immovable Force, Irresistible Object." It was a mangled collision of primary colors that possessed, he hoped, visceral intensity. In any case, it should pop the eyes of those who called his show last year "rigid."

He had dumped the brushes in turpentine when the telephone rang.

"Hello, Maxie! How's life in the country?" Even over the scratchy line Sid Hudson's voice boomed like a foghorn. "How's the work coming? I'd hate to see bare walls in my little gallery on March first."

"I'm right on schedule." Max stared at "Immovable Force," wondering if the bold smears would fly—even in New York. "When the

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snow is knee-deep, there's nothing to do but stay indoors and paint."

"I had no doubt you'd be staying indoors, but I'm glad to hear about the painting. By the way, there's a little blonde model named Janine who has been saying bad things about you."

Stoner groaned. "You didn't tell her where I am?"

"Wouldn't think of it. Wouldn't want my boy disturbed."

"Thanks."

"Now you do me a favor. Get it wrapped up by the first of February. This year I want time to decide just how to mount the show." Hudson's voice had dropped its joviality, and Max caught the unstated message.

He had better deliver—and big. A month would give Hudson time to scratch Max Stoner and plaster the walls with some struggling newcomer's daubs.

Max said, "If you don't hear from me in six weeks, I'm lost in a blizzard."

"Forget it—that's already been tried. It didn't help Walker Kent."

A tiny bell rang far back in Stoner's brain. "Who?"

"Kent. Walker Hieronymus Kent, the darling of the Works Progress Administration—that program back in the Big Depression."

The bell was a lot louder. "He painted Post Office murals?"

"My, the children *do* remember! The same. A certified point man in the vanguard of socialist realism. Hero in the thirties, washed up in the forties." Sid Hudson's decades in the business had made him a storehouse of case histories. "Sometime after the war he took a vacation up your way. They say he wandered off into a snowstorm. I don't think the body was ever found."

"I'll try to be more careful," Max said.

As he hung up, a cold thought wrapped its arms around him. *If this show doesn't work . . .*

If that back-stabber on *Palette* decides this is the time to turn on me with a tear-jerking death sentence. "*It is always painful to see an artist burned out in his middle thirties. Remember Max Stoner?*"

Sure we remember. Just like Walker Kent, he used his talent up. When that happens, there's nothing to do but put the loser back on the shelf and find somebody new to fawn over. The fellow you write off may not be able to sell a finger-painting after Yard, or meet the rent on the big Soho loft, but that's his worry.

Just as it was Walker Kent's.

Max frowned, wondering if he had stumbled across more than a coincidence. He had already admired Webster Lewis' professional

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brushwork, had already noticed the similarity to Kent's Post Office paintings.

If it was coincidence, it was a big one. Otherwise, it was more than possible that Walker Kent hadn't died in a blizzard, that he had quietly "retired" to a small remote village where he could remain a big fish under a new name.

If Max was right, he had a vague idea that such a secret could yield a payoff of some kind for Max Stoner.

A casual tour of the village disclosed better than a half-dozen other "Webster Lewises" hung in public places. They gave shape to his idea.

He checked the back issues at the tiny branch of the county public library and found that the Kingston *Journal* had carried a small item on December 12, 1947.

ARTIST FEARED LOST

St. Cyr (Special)—State Police have found no trace of Walker Kent, the New York City artist who disappeared from a cabin near here during last Thursday's heavy snowstorm. Cpl. Larry Dodge of the Kingston barrack said that Kent, 36, was apparently out sketching when the storm struck. "We probably won't find the body before spring," Cpl. Dodge said.

The librarian provided a county map on which he found St. Cyr. It was a hamlet about five miles north of Whistle.

It had been laughably easy. A stranger arrives in Whistle calling himself Webster Lewis. Why should anyone suspect he's the missing Walker Kent? A few years later he's a solid member of the community who happens to be a pretty good painter. So solid, Max thought with a smile, that dimwits like the bartender at the B'ar's Den forget he wasn't "born and reared" right here in Whistle.

On his way out of the reading room Max spotted yet another Lewis-Kent original. Something about it held his attention. His first glance had seen only a large, sentimental winter scene, a midnight field with a set of crisply etched footprints crossing virgin snow. A snow-draped fence stretched diagonally across the scene, perhaps marking a property line between farms. On the crest of a hill, among some trees, squatted a house. A pale yellow light shone on the second floor.

It took Stoner a minute to identify his own reaction, because it was a sense of foreboding. The light from the house was absorbed by the thick darkness before it reached the nearest trees. The fields and fence, sketched in the blues of starlight, suggested an unearthly

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cold. But even that hardly accounted for his suspicion that the painting hid something bizarre, something evil afoot.

Then he understood. The evil was indeed *afoot*. The spacing of the footprints, initially accepted even by his practised eye, was grotesquely wrong. The stride appeared normal on the left, a foot or so judging from the perspective and proportions, not a bad pace through snow. But the reach on the right—what must it be? Three feet? He tried to imagine the shape of a man who possessed a gait that left half as many footprints on one side as on the other. He would be long-leggity on the right, that was for sure.

The other thing Stoner noticed was that the snow trim on the fence lay undisturbed, although the footprints reached the obstruction and continued on the other side, en route to the farmhouse.

Uncertain, he smiled. Well, perhaps "Webster Lewis" had slipped up. Otherwise the midnight walker had taken one giant step over a seemingly waist-high fence. Quite a trick even for a long-legged man.

His eye followed the prints up to the farmhouse door: Even the painstaking brushwork hadn't given clarity to the shadowed porch, so it might have been Stoner's imagination that told him the door stood slightly ajar, as if the visitor had entered and hadn't bothered to shut it. He glanced uneasily at the garish signature. *Webster Lewis 1979.*

He spent that evening and most of the next day at the cottage, telephone off the hook, trying to imitate the odd style. Snow fell twice, clumping thickly on the narrow road. In late afternoon he pitched his brushes aside and admitted failure. Ten years of undisciplined daubing couldn't be remedied overnight. His attempt at realism was embarrassingly childlike.

He slogged into the village as a third, silent snowfall began. Passing the locked bank, he brushed a glass pane clear on the front door and peeked into the lobby. The light was poor, and he could only wonder if he had seen everything the first time he inspected the "foreclosure" scene. Last night he had dreamed about that painting, and the country kitchen had been occupied by an unspecified threat. He had dreamed himself in the role of the bony-faced banker, talking to the woman and not noticing that doors of the surrounding cupboards stood open a crack, as they might if rats or other hidden things were watching him and the woman from the darkness.

Stoner trudged the rest of the way through the tiny business

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district, not once hearing the murmur of a car engine or the muffled clink of chains. Few shops had turned on lights. The skiers seemed to have deserted the village.

He had found the address for Lewis in the township telephone directory. By the time he got there, up a hillside lane on which only a narrow track had been plowed, his feet were soaked. Hiking across the lawn left him wet to the knees.

The only light he saw was on the third floor, where it streamed from the front windows and a cupola. But his knocking brought a quick response.

The man was old enough to fit Stoner's theory. Easily in his late sixties, not more than five and a half feet tall, he shivered in a moth-eaten sweater and gestured Max inside with a trembling hand. "If your car is stuck, you can use the phone. Koppel's is the only towing service."

"My car isn't stuck. My name is Max Stoner. Maybe you've heard of me? I've been admiring your paintings in the village."

"Really?" The old man smiled tentatively.

"Superb work!"

That brought a full grin. "Thank you, thank you indeed. Come in. Would you like a drink?"

"Why not?" Stoner smiled.

So they had apricot brandy in the fussy, old-maidish parlor.

"Imagine, a city-slicker artist admiring my work," Lewis chirped.

"You've got quite a reputation in Whistle," Max said.

The old man nodded. He raised his glass with a palsied hand. "Nothing is given. It all must be earned. Are you famous in New York?"

"I've gotten some notice," Max allowed. "It's a treacherous field. You're loved today, forgotten tomorrow."

Lewis nodded as if he understood.

Max liked that. "Actually, I rented a place up here to buy myself some time. I've been working on a new style. Unfortunately, it hasn't been coming along. When I saw your paintings, they gave me an idea."

"Oh, really?"

"It occurred to me that we should collaborate."

"Collaborate?" The old man set down his glass. "Young man, I don't understand."

"It's simple enough. You'll keep painting as usual, but we'll show

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the work in New York. Under my name. We'll want to make some changes—"

"That's absurd!"

"It'll be quite a break from my old style, but that's good. Max Stoner went off to the mountain and came back a reborn realist."

"What would I get out of such a ludicrous arrangement?"

"Oh, five hundred dollars a painting."

The old man jerked forward. "Five hundred?"

Max nodded. "I think we could average two thousand a canvas. Realism is sort of 'in.' The gallery takes its cut, I take mine."

Lewis shook his head in wonder. "I've never gotten more than two hundred and fifty dollars."

"Then you agree?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I settled for limiting my career to Whistle long ago. Despite the poverty, I'm quite happy here. Besides, if my work is worth so much, why would I need you?"

"Well, you'd be getting my name."

"Humpf!"

"And my silence. I won't tell anyone what became of Walker Kent."

From the way the color sank from his cheeks, Max thought the old bird was having a heart attack. After a moment the white-haired head gave a violent shake. "You can't know that!"

"Your secret is safe," Max said, "if we come to terms."

He hummed a satisfied tune on the trek back to his cottage. In the end, Webster Lewis-Walker Kent had pleaded for a day to think it over, but Max Stoner knew he had a deal. And a fine one it was. As long as the old man lasted, he could count on a flow of well-crafted, subtly disturbing paintings. They might not set the art world on its ear, but they would keep his name afloat until something better came along.

The only risk was that somebody familiar with "Webster Lewis' " work would chance across one of Max's showings. And Stoner didn't think that was likely. These yokels probably didn't get down to the big city once in ten years.

He paused as he passed the Farmers & Merchants Bank. The power of the long-lost Walker Kent's evocation of evil was its lingering taint. Even now, without seeing the banker and the submissive farm wife, he felt certain that something malign was watching them.

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It occurred to him that after so many years of role-playing, Walker Kent might not have all his marbles.

The next day he didn't hear from his prospective partner. Late in the afternoon he hiked down to an almost deserted B'ar's Den. The bartender and the plow driver were talking about the storm that was coming. Stoner lingered over brandy, and it was dark by the time he got back to the cottage.

As soon as he flicked on the light he knew that he had had company. Wet footprints led from the door to his studio, and a small pool had formed in front of the easel that held his Walker Kent imitation.

The still-wet colors had been smeared into a muddy jumble. Brushes and tubes of paint had been flung wildly in all directions.

Still in his coat, Max swung on a heel and lurched for the door. This was going to cost the old boy. What, he wondered, would be a fitting punishment? Word that Max was withdrawing the offer and planned to unmask him?

Max, of course, planned no such thing. But he thought that Walker Kent needed to know who was boss.

The house was dark and nobody responded to his knocking. The night before, the old bird had refused to show Max any works in progress or finished canvases that hadn't been exhibited in town. Well, if the old man could make an uninvited visit, Max thought, so could he.

And Kent had made it just as easy as Max had by leaving the front door unlocked. On a hunch Max went straight up to the third floor before turning on a light. Interior walls had been knocked out so the studio could occupy the entire floor. Overhead, a small skylight was smothered by snow. Apart from four windows and another door in the far corner, the walls were bare, featureless.

Two easels stood in the center of the room, surrounded by tables stacked with fresh and painted canvases, jars of brushes, huge pads of sketch paper, and scattered sticks of broken charcoal. Propped against the walls were dozens of homey scenes—a bucket catching light at the edge of a well, a dog sleeping on a porch, a woman leaning in a doorway, a clothesline full of sheets being lashed and twisted in a rainstorm.

Weird. That was the only word for the stuff. Because looking closer, Stoner saw the gruesome details. Fingerprints dented the

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soft moss at the lip of the well. The dog wasn't asleep but dead and bloated. The woman smiled pleasantly and a shadow lurked behind her. The sheets bore rusty stains.

A cloth-draped canvas stood on one easel. As Max approached it, he tripped on something. Glancing down, he saw a ringbolt imbedded in the floor.

He reached to the easel and removed the cloth.

The demons had crawled into full view. Twisted hybrids of rat and man, they dined on the flesh of the innocent in the middle of a country living room. Despite himself, Max shuddered.

"Admiring my work again?"

The old man had come silently up the stairs. Grinning, he entered the studio.

Stoner looked back to the canvas. "I can't say I like it, but I've got a feeling the critics might. We hang this on Fifty-Seventh Street in New York, and someone's going to decide we're another Salvador Dali or Max Ernst."

"They'll decide *you* are. *You'll* get the credit—isn't that right?"

"You'll keep your secret."

"How old are you?" Lewis gave him an appraising squint.

Shrugging, Stoner replied, "Thirty-four."

"So young, so young. But I think you're right. We should collaborate. We're very much alike." His tone accused them both.

"In what way?"

"In our willingness to steal another man's work. You might say that I stole Walker Kent's."

"But you *are* Walker Kent."

The old man shook his head. "My name is Webster Lewis. I've lived in this house all my life. I took up art as a college student but never had much success, even here in Whistle, until about thirty years ago. That was when I found a collaborator."

Max frowned. The old man's addled brain had created an entire separate personality for refuge.

"When I heard that Walker Kent, the famous artist, was staying in St. Cyr, I took some of my paintings to show him. He sneered at them, said they were hopelessly amateurish. The next evening I lay in wait for him at his cabin. I hit him from behind, stashed him in the trunk of my car, then made it look as if he had thrown a tantrum in his studio, wrecking things before he walked out. That's just the way I made things look at your little house this evening."

As the meaning of that sank in, Max turned.

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"Would you like to meet Walker Kent?" Webster Lewis gestured with a frail trembling hand—a hand which, Max realized, could never have wielded a disciplined brush. "See the door over there? It opens onto a cupola. Go take a look."

The door was in the far corner, a heavy plank with a book-sized opening at eye level. Through that narrow window enough light seeped to show Max the filthy circular room and its scarecrow inhabitant, an ancient, white-bearded figure who crouched in a pile of rags on the floor. One bony ankle was wrapped in a metal bracelet, connected by a short chain to a ringbolt in the wall, well away from the window. The ringbolt was a twin of the one in the floor near the easel.

"We worked out a barter system. Mr. Kent painted what I told him, and I fed him."

"How long—" Max gasped.

"Why, thirty-two years. Of course, he eventually became hopelessly insane, and it affected his work. Can you imagine me showing something as grotesque as this"—he poked a thumb at the feasting rat creatures—"to my public in Whistle? Rural people want serene, pastoral pictures that affirm the everyday verities. I must say I prefer their taste to that of your New York élite."

From the pocket of his sweater Lewis drew a small black revolver. "This evening I mixed some rat poison into Mr. Kent's supper. He'll be dead by now."

"It's monstrous!"

Lewis shrugged. "Actually, I imagine it has been done a number of times in the past. Think of reclusive artists and writers. It's the artist's nature to display himself—yet some hide from their public. Why?"

Unlocking the cupola, he gestured Max inside. The leg iron, freed from Walker Kent, snapped shut snugly.

"Tomorrow, after the storm, they'll find that you disappeared. And tomorrow, you begin work. I'm very definite in my taste, Max. You'll have to do superb painting to earn your keep."

"But I'm an abstract artist!" Max cried. "I can't paint in your style."

"You'll learn to in time," his master predicted.

"Q"

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"Leo didn't kill himself. He and I were going to leave this dump as soon as he hit it big" . . .

HUMAN INTEREST ANGLE

by HAL CHARLES

By the time I got to Hinkle's rundown flat, I could tell the cops had already written off his death as suicide. The body lay on the kitchen floor surrounded by an irregular halo of white tape. The evidence of Detective Sergeant Philip Lash's nicotine habit flecked Hinkle's tattered cardigan. Two uniformed officers, under the pretense of tossing the joint, had lost more evidence than they had found.

"Harmon, anybody who gets here that fast is wasting his time as a newshound," said Lash, lighting up another butt. "You should have been an ambulance chaser."

"Actually I was in the neighborhood."

"Apartment hunting?"

"What have you got here?" I asked, trying to avoid his cynical barbs.

"One hack, very dead. You ever see so many brown envelopes in your life?"

I scanned the room. There were orange crates with brown envelopes, shelves with brown envelopes, brown envelopes with brown envelopes. Beneath a pile in the corner I thought I could make out the faint outline of a desk.

I picked up one of the 9x12's. "You look at any of these things?"

"A couple." Lash ground out his weed on Hinkle's holey rug. "Thought at first the stiff might be mailing out pornography, but the envelopes were all addressed to him. Nothing in them but manuscripts of stories."

"That's why you referred to Hinkle as a hack."

"What else do you call a guy whose assets consist of piles of used typing paper?" Lash sprawled out on the only piece of furniture in the room, a couch that was leaking foam rubber, and shouted at one

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of the uniformed cops. "Mullray, go get Mrs. Fein. I'm ready to see her now." Lash crossed his arms over his huge frame. "I got to be honest with you, Harmon. I don't think I could take it."

"Take what?"

"Rejection, to keep having my work sent back to me in brown envelopes. If that's all I got day after day, I might pull the trigger too."

"You lost me."

Lash got up and led me into the kitchen. He pointed out the powder burns, the .22, and the position of the dead man's hand. Beside the body was an overturned bottle and a puddle of Ripple '80. "That gun's registered in Hinkle's name."

"You sound about ready to tie up the package."

"Mullray," Lash shouted. "Get up here with that dame."

"Hard day?"

Lash stared at his watch. "Geez, it won't be midnight for another thirty minutes. I've been on duty for seven and a half hours, and you know how many homicides I've caught?"

I refused a cigarette as he lit up again.

"6.2."

".2?"

"A midget." He shook his head. "Hey, it's just a small joke."

Neither of us laughed. I'd seen it a hundred times before on my beat: a cop just about ready to go off duty gets one more call; he's worn out, had enough corpses, and he just goes through the motions. I guess that's one reason 15 percent of the homicides are never solved.

"Here she is," Mullray interrupted.

"About time you got around to me," came a shrill voice.

I turned to the doorway. A squatty woman in a torn bathrobe and curlers jerked her hand away from Mullray.

"Mrs. Fein is Hinkle's landlady," Lash explained before the red-faced figure reached us.

"You got some nerve making a lady wait when her gentleman friend's been murdered."

Lash held up his hands. "You're jumping to conclusions."

"I heard the shot. I rushed right up here and found the body. I tell you he was killed."

Lash, almost yawning in her face, said, "Lady, everything we got points to suicide. What makes you think somebody killed him?"

"I knew Leo Hinkle better than anybody, and I tell you, in the

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last few weeks he's never been happier. He dropped a few hints he was working on something big—said it was going to make him rich."

"Look around. Hinkle was a bona fide loser. He had as much chance of making it big with his writing as I do of making Police Commissioner."

She turned to me with a pleading look. "Leo didn't kill himself. He and I were going to leave this dump as soon as he hit it big."

I shook my head, but she continued to stare into my eyes.

"You look familiar," she said. "Haven't I seen your picture before?"

"Everybody has," Lash volunteered. "Mr. Harmon puts his mug shot above every column he writes for *The Herald*." The cop shot a glance at me. "Right now he's doing his best to make the department look bad in his series on the Syndicate."

Suddenly Mrs. Fein turned to a table. Pushing aside a camera, she waded into a pile of envelopes. At the bottom she picked up the telephone. She was livid. "You're not going to file Leo away as just another suicide."

"Calm down, Mrs. Fein," urged the sergeant. "Nobody's trying to cover up anything."

"I got a brother-in-law down at city hall, and I can cause trouble!"

I could see where the situation was headed, so I stepped forward. "Ma'am, I have a suggestion."

She paused in her dialing.

"I'm sure the sergeant wouldn't mind if I did a little snooping, saw what I could come up with. Reporters can be pretty resourceful, you know."

"Well . . ."

"Harmon," said Lash, pulling me to the side. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Listen, Phil, I'm just trying to get you off the hook. We both know a suicide when we see one. Maybe she *can* cause trouble. I'll do a little background, write a short puff piece, and the whole thing will blow over."

The burly cop looked at me suspiciously. "What's in this for you?"

"My editor's a sucker for the human interest angle. Besides," I said with a grin, "the next time I need an inside tip, you know who owes me."

Lash looked at his watch, took a deep drag on his cigarette, exhaled, and then nodded.

"You take care of the lady," I said. "I'll see if I can dig up some background."

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While Lash explained to Mrs. Fein that he agreed to my suggestion, I quickly rummaged through the brown envelopes. About the time Lash was ready to leave, I found what I was looking for.

Lash lit another. "I'm off duty in six minutes. You want to grab a drink?"

"No, thanks," I said, tapping the three envelopes in my hand. "I want to take care of this stuff."

Disappearing into his dirty green Ford, Lash looked back. "You know, Harmon, you're not such a bad guy for a syndicated columnist."

I walked around the corner to the car I had parked there hours before, then pulled out the middle envelope. It was different from the other two. There was no canceled stamp; it was addressed to the Police Commissioner, and it was sealed.

Ripping it open I pulled out the 8x10 glossy. Hinkle hadn't lied. He had taken a photo of Jake Argott handing me the weekly payoff that kept my column off the mob's back and on the cops'. It had been easier to give Hinkle the final rejection slip than to pay him through the nose.

The Fein dame had almost done me in twice. She'd come up the stairs before I could find the picture, and then she'd almost recognized me. She'd probably seen Hinkle's photo sometime earlier without realizing what it was.

But then, when I took the mob's money, I knew there would be risks in being—what was it Lash called me?—a syndicated columnist.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

NEW EDITOR: Michael Seidman, editor-in-chief of Charter Books, has taken over as the new editor of *The Armchair Detective*, oldest and best of the mystery fan publications. He will edit the quarterly in addition to his continuing duties at Charter Books, where he published Franklin Bandy's Edgar-winning *Deceit and Deadly Lies* in 1978 and Sean Flannery's Edgar nominee *The Kremlin Conspiracy* last year. Other familiar mystery names on the growing Charter Books lists include Victor Canning, John Dickson Carr, Leslie Charteris, Thomas Chastain, John Creasey, Stuart Kaminsky, Robert J. Randisi, and Donald E. Westlake.

The Armchair Detective was founded by Allen J. Hubin in 1967, and for its first nine years was edited and published from Hubin's Minnesota home. Publication then shifted to California and later to New York but Hubin remained as editor, winning an MWA Edgar award on the tenth anniversary of the magazine's founding. We'll miss Al Hubin at the helm, but we look forward to the first issue of TAD under the editorship of Michael Seidman.

PULP QUARTERLY: Another quarterly of some interest to mystery readers is *Just Pulp: The Magazine of Popular Fiction.* The format is that of a literary magazine, but the contents do indeed suggest the old pulps. Each issue contains about seven mystery, fantasy, western, and humorous stories, plus a selection of poems. Subscription price is six dollars a year, from *Just Pulp,* P.O. Box 243, Narragansett, R.I. 02882.

MEDICAL DETECTIVES: It's hard to believe it was twenty-six years ago that Berton Roueche won a special Raven award from Mystery Writers of America for his true stories of medical detection, *Eleven Blue Men.* Over the years Roueche has published four collections of these fascinating narratives, all of which originally appeared in the pages of *The New Yorker.* Now, happily, Times Books has brought together the best from these previous volumes, together with the most recent uncollected essays, to form *The Medical Detectives* ($15.00). The book contains twenty cases originally published in *The New Yorker* between 1947 and 1980. I can only add my praise to that of *Publishers Weekly,*

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which calls these chronicles of medical detection "as suspenseful and gripping as any imaginary mystery story."

SHERLOCKIANA: Another item in the continuing Sherlock Holmes revival has been published, and this one should appeal to all mystery readers regardless of their interest in Holmes. It's *The Amazing Mycroft Mysteries* by H. F. Heard (Vanguard, $14.95), reprinting three near-classic novels of the 1940s—*A Taste for Honey, Reply Paid,* and *The Notched Hairpin.* The mysteries are solved by Mr. Mycroft, a bee-keeping detective who just might be Sherlock Holmes's older brother—or even Holmes himself.

PSEUDONYM: Readers who enjoy Peter Lovesey's authentic Victorian mystery novels about Sergeant Cribb and Constable Thackeray should know that Lovesey also publishes novels under the name of Peter Lear. This pseudonym seems to be reserved for thrillers with a touch of fantasy, like 1978's *Goldengirl* (filmed last year with Susan Anton in the title role) and *Spider Girl,* just published by The Viking Press. By the way, Cribb and Thackeray, who appeared last spring in three episodes of the PBS television series, *Mystery,* will return for the program's second season.

WHO'S WHO: A massive 1,568-page guide to 614 English-language mystery writers has been published by St. Martin's Press. *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers,* edited by John M. Reilly ($50.00), contains a short biography of each writer, a complete booklist including uncollected short stories, a signed critical essay by an expert in the field, and, in many cases, a comment by the writer on his or her work. Two appendices deal with nine important Nineteenth Century mystery writers and sixteen foreign-language mystery writers.

The book contains a wealth of information, much of it never before published. On page 1392, for example, one learns that the mysterious Trevanian's real name is Rodney Whitaker—the first time to my knowledge that this information has appeared in print.

A companion volume on science-fiction writers will appear next June, and an earlier volume on children's writers is in print. The books will be updated every five years.

LOST MYSTERIES: Browsing through the above volume brought to mind a candidate for this month's Lost Mystery—Wade Miller's first novel, *Deadly Weapon,* published in 1946. Beginning with a murder in a San Diego burlesque theater, the book follows private detective Walter James to a solution I believe is unique in the private-eye genre. And publishers might also consider reviving the six novels about Miller's other private eye, Max Thursday.

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"Q"

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

A mystery play in which the audience *participates* can make for exciting theater. How is this possible? It has happened several times in various ways. Ayn Rand's politically activist *The Night of January 16th* is a 1935 play disguised as a murder trial—a young man has been accused of murdering a munitions king—and at each performance thirteen members of the audience are brought up onstage to sit in the jury box. There are two endings to the play, one for each verdict, and thirteen jurors meant there would not be a tie vote.

The Spider (1927), by Fulton Oursler and Lowell Brentano, starts out as vaudeville entertainment, with jugglers, and then a magician starts doing tricks—when suddenly a man sitting in the fifth-row aisle seat is discovered murdered. A doctor rushes out of the audience, and so does the chief of police, who just happens to be attending the show. The it's-happening-*now* realism of the drama is somewhat dispelled when the time comes for the play's first intermission, but interestingly enough, the villain—the head of a narcotics ring called the Spider—is ultimately unmasked by the magician in the audience as well.

In more recent years, *The Real Inspector Hound* had two "critics" move from the spectator side into the comic murder plot, and in a short-lived Broadway suspense experiment called *We Interrupt This Program* a band of terrorists rises up from the audience to "take over" a straight play and hold the theater for ransom! But this is more in the nature of actors "planted" amidst unsuspecting theater-goers. Recently, however, a mystery play made its debut in Boston which actually *absorbs* its audience each evening into the unfolding of the plot . . . an improvisational murder investigation which reminds one of a giant, living game of *Clue.*

The play is called *Shear Madness*—no, not a knife-wielding psychotic but a chic Boston unisex hair salon, where the action unfolds, the audience surrounding an actually working beauty-parlor setting in cabaret-theater fashion. Two operators, flighty Tony and bored Barbara, are doing customers while a radio blares disco in the background. It's an actual local station, commercials and all (one of them for the salon itself) adding to the realism. Then, discordantly, a piano is heard; crazed Isobel Czerny, the elderly tenant upstairs, a famed concert performer until she went mad, imagining "helium filling her fingers," is at it again. Tony rails at the ceiling, customers exit and enter, and Isobel is found dead—a pair of scissors in her throat. The police arrive there immediately—actually, cops had been staking out the place because Isobel had notified them she was being blackmailed—and tough Lieutenant Nick Rossetti begins interro-

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gating a quartet of suspects as to the events leading up to the discovery of the woman's body.

So far it's standard. But Rossetti, almost without pausing in his reconstruction attempts, suddenly turns to the audience: "You were all witnesses. Help me out. Are these people telling the truth?" None of them fully are, of course, and an enthusiastic audience joins the investigation with the zeal of a wolf pack, firing questions, contradicting players' statements, demanding re-enactments, insisting that briefcases be opened and evidence (a bloody apron and a wet toothbrush among them!) be produced. Everything on the stage is functional, and every minute real—even an intermission is integrated, with the police detective questioning patrons in the lobby while inside the theater the still-playing radio interrupts with a "late newsbreak" on the pianist's death and career ("a recluse, she was seen publicly for the first time in many years at Arthur Fiedler's funeral . . . "). Audience members can come onstage to finger evidence, read some discovered love letters, even actually call the Boston Police number on a working phone to be assured the cops are genuine! (The telephone is real, but the line goes backstage.) The audience moves along the plot and *votes* who is the guilty party—triggering one of the play's four endings.

Affable Bruce Jordan, who plays Tony, is *Shear Madness'* adaptor-director and discoverer. It was originally in German, called *Cutthroat*, by Swiss playwright Paul Portner, but very dour and Teutonic. Jordan first saw it in Rochester, translated (to *Whodunit*) but still stiff, acquired the rights and added a sense of humor and immediacy. The play now sparkles, and audiences respond to the fun and their involvement in the chase. At one performance a patron who had left during a crucial moment to go to the restroom was later fingered as the killer by those around him; another night someone rushed up from the audience to confess! Productions are being planned for San Francisco and New York, each tailored to its new city, and each certain to generate the same amount of fun.

Jordan has given us a unique mystery play with a Boston beginning that's well groomed for travel and sheer madness to miss.

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INTERVIEW: WILLIAM X. KIENZLE

After twenty years as a Roman Catholic priest, William Kienzle quit and turned to writing. His first book, *The Rosary Murders*, was a book-club selection, a major paperback success, and is now being filmed. His second, *Death Wears a Red Hat*, also a huge success (both popular and critical), brings back the same series characters: Father Koesler, Homicide Inspector Walter Koznicki of the Detroit Police Department, and the two journalists who vie for the story.

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EQMN: How did a man with such a background of gentleness come to write such violent books?

KIENZLE: I didn't intend to do that. I wanted to write an autobiographical, happy, anecdotal sketch of my years in the priesthood. No violence, no sex (or very little, anyway), no recriminations. I was assured by a senior editor at St. Martin's Press that three or four people would be interested in reading a book like that. When someone else came up with the idea of a mystery, I sat down one evening with an envelope (a la Lincoln) and tried to get the bones of it down. It became *The Rosary Murders.*

EQMN: In *Death Wears a Red Hat,* there is a great deal of voodoo in the background. Do you believe it is a valid religion—that it works?

KIENZLE: Yes. It is fundamentally the religion of Africa, and the people who were pulled out of Africa pulled voodoo out with them. Oddly, when the British took slaves, they considered them property, but when the French took slaves, they considered them human, although inferior, and they imposed Catholicism on them. The slaves had little to say about it, so they accepted Catholicism and blended it with voodoo, and that is where most of the rites are now: a blend of Catholicism and voodoo.

EQMN: But does it work?

KIENZLE: Yes, but like everything of this sort, you have to believe in it to make it work. I don't think it would work against me if someone wanted to have a death voodoo against me. I'm not sure, but I don't *think* it would. So the last victim in *Death Wears a Red Hat* comes from a Haitian culture, he believes in voodoo, and I try to give the impression that he was killed by voodoo, as one can be. This would certainly upset a police case, and a medical examiner, because they can't go forward. I checked with an FBI agent friend of mine and asked him what would happen if a voodoo, or black magic, case were being investigated, and he said no one would know what to do. It would have to be an unsolved case.

EQMN: I don't want to give too much away, but there's a trace of *Death Wish* in your second book. Do you find a moral difficulty here?

KIENZLE: No, because I don't believe in vigilantism, but I believe that fiction ought to have a few. Just because Charles Bronson taunts criminals and then takes them out doesn't mean other people will—unless they're psychopaths already. But it's nice for the Walter Mittys of the world to vicariously experience the daydream.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Mental institutions make an interesting locale for fictional murder. But in no other background does one long-standing but often-broken detective-story rule apply more stringently: the murderer must not be insane.

Patrick Quentin followed that rule in the newly reprinted 1936 classic, *Puzzle for Fools* (Avon, $2.25). In his first recorded adventure, the eternally troubled theatrical producer Peter Duluth is drying out from a bout with alcoholism, following the death of his first wife. He begins to suspect that someone in Dr. Lenz's sanitarium is trying to prevent his cure, along with those of some of the other, more unbalanced patients, through the use of phantom voices and other tricks to undermine sanity. The claustrophobic atmosphere of a psychiatric institution, even one as pleasant and avant-garde as this one, is beautifully conveyed, and the novel remains a model of style, suspense, and evasive puzzle-plotting.

A newer novel with a similar background doesn't achieve the heights of Quentin but also has its moments. *** Hugh McLeave: *No Face in the Mirror*, Walker, $9.95. In Dr. Sutherland's experimental Beauchamp Manor, schizophrenic patients are asked to work out their own cures without benefit of drugs or shock treatment. According to opponents of the method, the lunatics literally run the asylum. Suicides that may have been murder threaten the existence of the Manor, and Dr. Alec Maclean (a potential series character?) takes up residence to investigate. Though the somewhat messy and overcomplicated solution doesn't bear comparison with Quentin's, the mental patients and their doctors are very well drawn and interest stays high.

*** B. M. Gill: *Death Drop*, Scribners, $8.95. Reader involvement with the characters is also the key to the success of another new British novel. A twelve-year-old public school student dies in a fall while on a field trip to a maritime museum. It seems to be an accident—but why was the boy blindfolded? His father descends upon the school, seeking the truth. The background and the relationships are very well done. This may be the debut of a major new talent.

*** J. C. S. Smith: *Jacoby's First Case*, Atheneum, $9.95. Quentin Jacoby, a retired New York transit cop and harness-racing enthusiast, reluctantly turns private eye to help a wealthy youth search for his wandering girl friend. Jacoby is a believable and likeable character and a keen observer of his New York background, especially the subway system. If Smith ever concocts a plot for Jacoby that lives up to the telling, the sky's the limit.

*** Gregory Mcdonald: *Who Took Toby Rinaldi?*, Putnam, $9.95. Maintaining the light touch of his earlier novels, a neat trick in a story involving the kidnaping of a diplomat's young son, Mcdonald takes full ad-

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vantage of the suspense possibilities of a Disneylandish amusement park called Fantazyland. This is basically an upbeat story that would make a nice G-rated movie with only a little judicious cleaning up.

*** Elliott Lewis: *Two Heads Are Better,* Pinnacle, $1.75. Lewis, who played Frankie Remley on Phil Harris's radio show and was one of a small army of radio Archie Goodwins, is still active in that medium as a writer-producer. His first novel introduces a new series detective, ex-L.A. cop Fred Bennett, engaged by his former boss to prevent the kidnaping of a Brazilian heiress. Lewis writes in the hard, objective, downbeat style of the Black Mask days. The pace is fast, the social observations sharp. This could be a series to watch.

The currently bullish market in mystery reprints brings forth two early novels by Catherine Aird: 1966's *The Religious Body* and 1970's *The Stately Home Murder* (Bantam, $1.95 each). The former, Aird's debut concerning murder in a convent, is good. The latter is even better, one of the funniest, deftest, and generally most delightful classical specimens of recent years. Both novels star the humorously bland Inspector C. D. Sloan.

As Harlan Ellison indicates in his provocative introduction, the three short novels by James M. Cain gathered in *Hard Cain* (Gregg Press, $13.95) do not represent the author of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* at his best. But their reprinting after years of obscurity represents an event in crime-fiction publishing. All were Avon paperback originals—inexplicably to Ellison—and vanished almost as soon as they appeared. *Sinful Woman* (1947), set in wartime Reno, is fast reading and neatly plotted in a B-movieish way. *Jealous Woman* (1950), also set in Reno, may be as close as Cain ever came to a straight detective story, though it is neither very good nor very close. *The Root of His Evil* (1951), much the best of the trio, is not really a crime or mystery novel, though there is some stock market intrigue. Here Cain successfully employs a first-person female narrator, a very believable and strong-willed young waitress who becomes involved in unionizing activity and unknowingly marries into a wealthy society family. It's another movie (complete with Hollywood ending) but this time an A, a natural vehicle for the young Bette Davis. According to Ellison, it was written in 1938. It seems very much a thirties novel, though updated by references to the war.

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"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 563rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a clever short-short . . .

The author, Joyce Segal, is a suburban housewife, happily married, with a teenage daughter. She has "no claim to any fascinating hobbies," since her attempts "at tennis, needlepoint, and scuba diving all ended in disaster."

Mrs. Segal is the author of several children's books and stories—"The Missing Mystery Writer" is her first adult fiction . . .

THE MISSING MYSTERY WRITER

by JOYCE SEGAL

"To all my dear, dear mystery-writer friends. I know you will understand when I tell you that I am finally, after five years of talking and planning, settling down to write my novel, *The Thirteenth Guest*. So please, please, let me have the quiet and privacy I need to concentrate. No lunches, no shopping, no meetings. Please don't come to my house, and above all, don't phone me. I promise to read the manuscript to all six of you at our April 10th meeting. And now, nothing but work, work, work.

Love,

Daria O. Henshaw"

Loralee Brett finished reading the note to the other members of the Rivercrest Mystery Writers Club. It was their first meeting of the new year. As usual, they met at Loralee's house the first Saturday of every month from two to five in the afternoon.

"Well, what do you make of it? I found this shoved under my door." She waved the pink stationery and envelope in the air.

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"Sounds like a great idea to me," said Stella Grimes. "I wish I had the guts to cut myself off from everybody and just write." She settled herself comfortably in the overstuffed chair.

"I don't like it," said Loralee. "There are too many things wrong. For example, I looked at the calendar and the first Saturday of April is the third, not the tenth."

"Oh, Loralee, stop thinking like a would-be mystery writer," said Stella. Then, apparently noticing Loralee's flushed face, she added, "I mean a mystery writer, and a good one, too. Anybody can make a mistake in the date."

Loralee glared. Some day she'd make Stella a victim—in one of her stories, of course. A nice grisly death, she mused. Just because Stella was the only one in the group who'd made a sale so far—a short-short to the local newspaper—she thought she was something. But then Loralee caught herself up in the day's problem. "Maybe. But even if she did make a mistake in the date, she'd know that the first Saturday of any month would have to have just one digit."

Verna Thomas swung her long legs over Loralee's plush sofa. "I tend to agree with Loralee. There *is* something crazy about that letter. She says all six of us. She knows we're only four, counting her. Even though we've had a few others from time to time, we're the only ones who've stuck it out."

"That's true," said Stella grudgingly. "It is funny. Even though I always had Daria pegged as a dizzy dame, she isn't that dumb."

They looked at each other uneasily.

"Maybe we should phone her," said Verna tentatively.

"It's Loralee's house," said Stella. "She should make the call."

"I guess I could phone," said Loralee. "I hope she won't be angry at me in case it's nothing." Daria was known to have a temper.

Loralee dialed Daria's familiar number. "It's busy," she said. A chill crept through her.

"She might have taken the phone off the hook," speculated Verna. "I know I do it all the time when I'm working."

"It's a possibility," said Loralee. Her voice was weaker than she had ever known it to be.

"Hey, wait a second," said Verna. "There's something else funny about that note. Why does Daria say 'five' years? We've only been meeting regularly for a year and a half."

"I've known Daria since grammar school," said Loralee. "She's been talking about writing that book for at least twenty years. You're right. It gets stranger and stranger."

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Stella was the first to break the uncomfortable silence. "I don't know," she said. "Five, shmive, what's the difference. Daria's always vague about details. That's the trouble with her writing."

"Wait a minute," said Loralee. "Now that I think of it, maybe Daria is trying to tell us something. She wouldn't make so many mistakes in one note unless there was a good reason."

"Are you sure it's her handwriting?" asked Verna.

Loralee studied the letter. "I'm sure. I even recognize the paper, and I'd know that round penmanship anywhere. Daria's always written like that, since she was Daria Mason. Oh, my God. I've just noticed something else. Daria's maiden name was Mason, and her middle name is Louise. Why would she write O as her middle initial? Yes, that's it—she's trying to give us a message."

Stella snatched the paper from Loralee's hands. "But what?" she asked. "She says not to visit or phone her. She even makes a point of us not calling. 'Above all, don't phone me.' "

"That's it!" cried Loralee. "She doesn't want us to call *her*. What good would it do if she's in trouble? And she doesn't want us to visit her. There might be danger in the house. She must have told whoever it is who's"—Loralee's voice broke off for a moment—"she must have told them that we're expecting her and that's why they let her write that note and got it over here today. She wants us to call for help."

"And how did you come to that brilliant conclusion?" asked Stella.

"I don't understand either," said Verna.

"Look," said Loralee. "I think she's giving us the clues to a telephone number. Let's take them in the order she wrote them. Five—the number of years she mentions. Thirteen—from the title of her book. Six—the wrong number of club members. Ten—the wrong meeting date. And the 0 in her signature. That's 513-6100. It's worth a try."

Her fingers trembling, Loralee dialed the number.

It was the Rivercrest Police Department.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 564th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . It was an old-fashioned watch, one that snapped open and shut . . .

The author, Nicholas Snow, is a journalist in his early thirties, transplanted from Utah, where he grew up, to Washington, D.C., where he is now managing editor of "The Oil Daily." It takes Mr. Snow an hour to commute to work each day, and since he gets car-sick when he tries to read on the bus, he has begun to pass the time by plotting mystery stories.

Mr. Snow has been previously published—nonfiction, chiefly articles on music, and principally on jazz (he's a long-time fan although lately, he tells us, he has turned to "bluegrass and the classics"). His wife, also a journalist, is "working on a short story of her own." A mystery?

I WANT MY LAWYER

by NICHOLAS SNOW

"Hello, Danny," the cop said, and smiled. That's when I knew I was in trouble.

"What's the beef?" I asked, and the cop replied, "No beef. Captain Ballard just wants to ask you some questions." When he smiled again, I knew it wasn't about the weather.

Christy Harker and I had blown into town the afternoon before to spend the weekend at the races. Saturday would be summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and the Mimosa Gardens race track had an extended series that was too good to resist. Besides, I was there on the job, a simple pickup and delivery. Pickup from Charlie Powell and deliver—well, just deliver.

Only here I was much too early on a Saturday morning with a uniformed cop standing in my motel-room door asking me to accom-

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pany him to the station house. In a town like Mimosa, under ordinary circumstances, that would mean killing the morning with some hick cop trying to nail you for a holdup the night before. But since Captain Roy Ballard was an ex-deputy sheriff from Los Angeles County who'd met me before, it meant the circumstances were anything but ordinary.

Mimosa was one of those Central California farm towns that had lost its water to L.A. many years ago. Any growth that had been coming its way had been siphoned off to the coast—until the city fathers realized there was money to be made when a concessionaire came in and asked to build a race track. There was money all right, and the kind of people those same city fathers decided their daughters should stay away from. To protect their daughters, the fathers lured Ballard, who'd had it with L.A. by then, to put together a police force. Politics dictated that the chief would still be an old duffer named Wayne. But anyone who had a brush with the Mimosa force knew it was run by Ballard.

After I'd dressed I took a last look at Christy passed out in bed. Then I followed the cop outside to his car and he drove me to the station. I pulled out my pocket watch. It was 10 A.M. I still had time to get this taken care of, have Christy come over in the Grey Ghost, and get out to the track in time to get a bet on a trifecta I'd heard about.

Ballard looked pretty much the same as when I last saw him—tired. It was apparent he'd tried to turn the station into what could pass for a professional operation. But when you don't have a lot to start with, you can only go so far. The room into which the uniformed cop led me was too close to the front desk—I could hear someone typing the whole time.

Ballard looked up from the small table around which some chairs had been set and said, "Thanks, Palmer," to the uniformed cop. Palmer was obviously a local boy who figured I was one of the bad influences who'd soiled the town when the track came in, so I made it a point to say, "Thanks for the fun time," as he passed by. He let it slide, but the crack made Ballard grin. "I'd forgotten that about you," he said.

"Let's cut the formalities, Roy," I suggested. "You and I go too far back to fool around."

"We do at that," he said, the grin still on his face. "What brings you to town, Danny? I have it on good authority it's more than the race track."

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"Tell me more," I said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. "I always like to hear what they're saying about me on the street."

Ballard's face hardened. "What did you do last night after you got here, Danny?" he growled. "Somebody saw you over at Charlie Powell's last night, but he couldn't say why. But other people say it had to do with money."

I studied Ballard's expression and realized this was getting bad. "I want a lawyer," I said.

Ballard glared at me. Then he leaned out the open door and bawled, "Palmer! Get somebody over here from Legal Aid!"

"No, no," I said, "not one of those storefront liberals. I want my lawyer. She's back in my motel room."

Christy rolled in about 15 minutes later. She'd taken enough time to get made up and fix her hair into those little brown ringlets I like, so you couldn't tell she'd tied one on with me the night before—until you looked into her eyes. Then there was no doubt.

The old chief, Wayne, and a woman stenographer had joined Ballard by then. Ballard was getting annoyed with the way I kept pulling my watch out of my pocket to check the time. He'd known me long enough to know that a watch is something I like to have on me, but that it's usually pawned. So he also knew I was riding high now in the money department.

The first thing Christy did was ask them to explain why I was brought in for questioning. Ballard said what I'd been afraid of: a girl friend of Powell's named Virginia Tyson had pulled into town early that morning and gone looking for him. When she finally got someone to let her into his office, they'd both found Powell dead with a knife in his back. Ballard and some other cops had questioned a couple of local businessmen who'd been working late the night before and one of them had said he'd seen someone fitting my description go up to Powell's office a little before 10 P.M.

"What we want to know," said Ballard, "is what, if anything, went on between you and Powell last night because you may well have been the last person to see him alive."

I looked at Christy. She was squinting and rubbing the temples of her forehead with the thumb and fingers of her right hand. "Aghhhh," she said, "you suppose you could be a little more specific in your questioning, Lieutenant?"

"Captain," corrected Wayne, but Ballard ignored her jibe. "Just tell me what you did last night, starting with when you came into

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town," he said to me. I looked at Christy again, and she nodded.

"Tell it to him straight, and don't embellish it," she said.

"He knows just how to do that," said Ballard. "He's been in this position often enough to be a pro by now."

I decided to let that one pass because I still wanted to get to the race track. So I related how Christy and I had pulled into town the night before around 6:30 after the four-hour drive from L.A. We had dinner at the hotel restaurant from seven to around nine. Then I explained how I had to drop by Charlie Powell's sometime that night to pick up what I'd come for. I had tried to phone Powell, but got no answer. I had heard the phone relays connect, then I'd heard silence. I finally called the operator and had her place the call. She got the same thing, said the line was out of order, and promised to report it. That was around 9:15.

I told Christy that I'd have to keep my appointment with Powell at ten and went down to the little building he had his office in. The guy who ran the drug store downstairs let me in to wait in the hall, but Powell's office was locked. I spent about a half hour there—until 10:15 or so—but the place was like a tomb. So I took off to do some drinking with Christy.

"So you see," I wound up, "I wasn't the last person to see him alive, because I didn't see him at all."

"So you say," snorted Wayne, and Ballard leaned forward. "Notice anything about that druggist?" he asked.

"Just that I damn near had to hit him on the head to get his attention. The guy's nearly deaf," I said.

"Exactly," said Wayne. "So Powell could have come up the back stairs, let you in his office, and been stabbed in the back while he had his safe open to give you the money. And the guy downstairs wouldn't have heard a thing."

"Hey, Pop," said Christy, "ease up. This is going beyond the bounds of good taste."

"And what about you, little lady?" Wayne turned on her. "What have you got to tell us?"

Bloodshot as they were, Christy's eyes flashed. "I haven't 'got' to tell you anything," she said in a low voice, "except what you need to pursue this case. Which is that I was with Mr. Daniel Richmond, my client, until around 9:30 when he went downtown to see Mr. Powell. He was gone about an hour. When he came back, he said Powell hadn't shown up. Beyond that, sir, our relationship is that of lawyer and client. Anything that passes between us is privileged."

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"All right, boys and girls," said Ballard. "I think we've got enough to start with here. We may have to call you back later," he said to Christy and me, "but for the time being, we'd appreciate your sticking around long enough to make sure the statement you gave us, Danny, is what you recall happening. It'll take Julie here about an hour to get it transcribed. You can wait out front till she has it ready, if you don't mind." The way he smiled implied we didn't have much choice.

Wayne and Ballard went down the other direction to confer in the chief's office. Christy and I found two chairs opposite the front desk and sat down to wait, Christy rolling her head back and trying to take a nap, me surveying the surroundings.

"Honey," she said after a few minutes, "you're in trouble for sure this time. Those two don't wish you well, not a single bit, and they've got you going up to Powell's office last night and standing in the hall for a half hour unattended. That may not be enough to convict you in court, but if Wayne's version ever makes it to the street and to the gentlefolk who sent you up here, somebody's going to figure you got greedy, knifed Powell, and pocketed the money. I'd be worrying if I were you."

She didn't have to tell me. I already was.

It took the stenographer longer to transcribe my statement than Ballard had said. I kept pulling out my watch, snapping it open to check the time, and snapping it shut again. It gave me a lot of opportunities to read the inscription inside: "To My Son, Daniel, from his Proud Father, Frank Richmond, on his graduation." My father had expected me to go on to better things the way he had, and sitting on that police-station bench, my lawyer periodically groaning beside me, I wished I had. Right then, the peace and security of respectable living looked a lot better than where my years of hustling had led me.

That's what an inscription on an old timepiece can do to you. The watch ran well. It said 11:37, and that's when she walked in.

She was a tall frosted blonde whose face wore an expression of total control for a few seconds after she came in. Then it suddenly became helpless, and she seemed a little shorter. I straightened up on the bench to watch her go to the front desk, ask for Captain Ballard, and give her name—Virginia Tyson.

Ballard came out almost immediately, cast a glance toward Christy and me, and hurried Virginia Tyson back to the room where

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I'd given my statement. Wayne went in there a few minutes later and shut the door behind him. But it wasn't enough: just as I had heard the sound of typewriters and radio traffic from inside that room, I could now pick up most of what was being said from my spot near the front desk. It was quite an earful.

The woman spoke with a peculiar accent. It turned out she was from Calgary, Alberta, Canada, a good friend of Powell's from some of his forays north. A very good friend, from the way she had to keep from crying as she told her story.

She and Powell had arranged to meet in Phoenix for the weekend before taking off to Mexico. But when she got to the hotel, a Holiday Inn on Van Buren, there was a message: Powell would be delayed. He had some business to take care of in Mimosa.

She called Powell's office two or three times before finally connecting with him almost exactly at 10 P.M. ("I think that would have been nine o'clock your time," she thoughtfully supplied.) They spoke four or five minutes and he finally agreed she was to catch the first plane to Riverside the next morning, then drive up to Mimosa.

"You say almost exactly ten o'clock," I heard Ballard say. "How are you so sure?"

"Why, I was in my room watching television when the news came on," she explained. "That's when I finally got to speak to Charlie."

Christy stirred. "Baby," she whispered, "I think it's time for me to find a john. Could you get someone to help me? I don't feel at all . . . well." I got a stenographer to take her down the hall past the room in which Virginia Tyson was telling her story to what was known as the "ladies' comfort area." By the time I got back to the bench, I couldn't hear much more out of the room—the radio traffic had picked up because of an automobile accident near the race track. The race track. Where I wanted to be.

It was another half hour before the stenographer had my statement ready. First, before she gave it to me to read, she went back and got Ballard. He came down the hall just in front of Christy, who didn't look that much better in spite of her time in the "ladies' comfort area." I got a quick glimpse of Virginia Tyson handing Wayne some papers—probably receipts from the Phoenix Holiday Inn that she so "thoughtfully" kept—before Ballard pulled the door closed.

I looked over my statement, and when Ballard asked me if I wanted to make any changes, I shook my head. Christy smiled then, the first time all morning.

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"One change I'd make if I were you," she said to Ballard, "and that is to do your questioning somewhere else."

"That's right," I added. "I could hear just about everything from near the front desk."

"It sounds even better from the women's john," said Christy.

Ballard looked from one of us to the other. "We're working on that," he admitted. Then his eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. What did you two hear, anyway?"

"Same thing you did," Christy said. "That little cupcake is in this thing up to her ears. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she put the knife in old Charlie herself."

Ballard looked at me and I nodded. "What makes you so sure?"

Christy smiled again. "Captain," she said, "that's your department. But Danny says you're a pretty bright cop, so you won't have any trouble figuring it out. Danny and I can stick around as long as you need us—at city expense, of course. Right now, we're going to the races."

Christy had the Grey Ghost well away from the police station and heading toward the track before I finally said, "All right, Christy, what gave her away?"

"It was obvious from the start she was an amateur who came in for the big score," Christy replied. "Her attitude was the first giveaway—cooperating with the police so much, even to the point of providing them with hotel receipts to verify that she was, in fact, in Phoenix. Which she wasn't."

"Of course she wasn't," I agreed. "That bit with the tears wasn't too convincing. She could have pulled the knife, stuck it in Charlie as he bent over the safe, cleaned out the safe, let herself out, and gone down the back stairs. Then she could have driven to Riverside—it's only about two and a half hours from here—to meet the plane with whoever stayed at the hotel in Phoenix, got the receipts, driven back up to Mimosa, and done the rest."

"Right," said Christy.

"It's a great theory," I said. "But I still can't figure out what nailed her."

"The phone call. And it was your obsession with your watch that got me wondering. You're so proud of that watch, yet you gave approximate times in your story. But she insisted on giving a precise time for the phone call, probably because she took it as a signal that her alibi was in place before she did poor Charlie in. That call

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probably came in right at nine P.M. Mimosa time, which made her figure it was ten P.M. in Phoenix. But it wasn't, Danny. It was only nine."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Phoenix is in the Mountain Time Zone, which is on daylight saving time with everybody else."

"Right and wrong," said Christy. "Phoenix is in the Mountain Time Zone—but Arizona is the one state in that zone that doesn't go on daylight saving time, probably because it gets so hot there they don't want an extra hour of daylight."

"So if she called at ten," I mused, "it would have rung at ten in Mimosa—and I was standing outside and didn't hear a thing!"

"Close," said Christy, "but no cigar. You'd still be in trouble, except for one thing. You tried to call Powell at 9:15 and couldn't get through. So how could she have talked to him at ten, especially since whoever killed him probably yanked out the phone for good measure to make it look like straight robbery. We don't know that for sure," she added, "but I'll bet the cops do. And since the phone company keeps records of complaints, there's at least one place in writing that backs up your story—and disputes hers. That's what gets you off the hook."

"And puts her in the kettle," I said. "Christy, you're a damn good lawyer. And beautiful in the bargain."

"Oh, heck, I know that," she said with a laugh. "But do you have any idea how lucky you are that Virginia Tyson is both arrogant and foolish? Just think where you'd be, Danny, if she hadn't come back to try and put one over on the small-town Mimosa cops—or if she'd set up her alibi in, say, Santa Barbara instead of Phoenix."

"Lucky?" I snorted. "I've had it as a runner, at least in this town and probably all around Southern California. We're not supposed to be conspicuous, you know." I snapped open my watch. "And on top of everything else, I'm too late to put any money down on that trifecta!"

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 565th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a 'tec type new to us—meet Elizabeth Nelson, a real-estate agent . . .

The author, Hope Raymond, is a graduate of the University of Chicago. She has spent most of her working life in Manhattan, New York City, but she has also lived in the Midwest and briefly in North Carolina, New Mexico, and southern England. At present she is a freelance secretary and editor. She doesn't have much time for hobbies, but she enjoys gardening and is "mildly interested in jewelry-making" . . .

THE MYSTERIOUS MESSENGER

by HOPE RAYMOND

Glenda introduced the trouble. That figured, since she's our receptionist and introduces everything and everybody.

It was a warm afternoon in early June. The Manhattan traffic was humming below my office windows, louder than bees in a garden but almost as soporific. I was sitting at my desk trying to compose a letter that would persuade a prospect to deal with Bandsberg Realty Properties and only with Bandsberg Realty Properties. When the phone rang I jumped.

"Elizabeth Nelson," I said.

"There's somebody here to see you, Elizabeth," said Glenda. I knew it must be a stranger—calling me Elizabeth is Glenda's idea of formality. Normally she calls me Lizzie, and short of imitating Miss Borden there is very little I can do about it. "It's Lieutenant Aurelio with a City directive."

I could hear faint sounds of protest in the background, which meant, I knew, that Glenda had got something slightly wrong. She often does.

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"Ask him to come in," I said.

The tall young man who appeared in the doorway was obviously not Italian. "O'Reilly, Miss Nelson," he said, extending an identification card. "City detectives."

"Please sit down," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"We were hoping that you'd be able to tell us something about Ballden, Harris and Skinner," he said.

"They're tenants of ours—ninth floor of the Mittler Building. But you must know that. Has something happened?"

"I thought you would have heard," said O'Reilly. "The hall man there says you're his boss. There's been a shooting."

"Good Lord! At Ballden, Harris?"

"That's right. Their secretary, Mary Culvaney."

"Is it bad?"

"She was dead when we got there," said O'Reilly.

"I can't believe it," I said. "What happened? Was it a nut, or robbery, or what?"

"We don't know," said O'Reilly. "She was alone in the office during the lunch hour and Ballden found her when he came back. There are some indications of robbery, but it's an unusual case. We'd like any background you can give us on the people there, including Miss Culvaney."

I tried to pull myself together. "She seemed like a nice girl," I said. "I certainly want to help if I can. But I don't know a great deal about them, except that they're a small advertising agency. They leased the space at the beginning of last year, and I understood they were just going into business then. I gathered that they had all worked together at one of the big Madison Avenue outfits. I believe Ballden specializes in copy, Harris in production, and Skinner in art, and I think Mary had been Ballden's secretary.

"They're set up as a corporation, but from something that was said when we were discussing the lease I think they all own stock and have an arrangement to share the profits rather than take salaries—at least, while they're getting started. They've been good tenants, although they were fussy about colors of paint and so on at the beginning. They pay the rent on time, don't complain unnecessarily, and don't cause any trouble."

"You don't know them personally?"

"If there are still just the three men and Mary Culvaney, I met them all when they were settling on the space. I haven't seen them since except when we run into each other in the Mittler lobby."

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O'Reilly gave me a searching look, apparently found nothing informative in my face, asked a few more questions about BH&S's references and banks, and departed, with a final request that I call a number he left with me if I remembered anything else or learned anything of interest.

After he had left I sat for a while looking out of the window, thinking of Mary Culvaney, who had seemed sweet and gentle, not at all the sort of person who gets shot, and asking myself whether this was something I should handle without bothering Mr. Bandsberg.

Deciding that it wasn't, I made my way down the hall. Fortunately he was alone.

"There's trouble at Baldy, Hairy and Skinny," I said. Glenda had dubbed the firm that the first time Ballden had called us, and it had stuck because it fit. Ballden, although still in his thirties, had a natural tonsure; Harris had abundant curly auburn hair not only on his head but on his arms and the back of his hands; and Skinner looked like a 35-year-old male anorexia case. Glenda hadn't known that when she christened them, though. It was just one of her lucky shots.

"What now?" said Mr. Bandsberg.

"Somebody has shot the secretary over there," I said. "A police lieutenant was just here."

"Omigod!" he said. "Not again!"

"Again?" I said.

"That's right, you weren't here when that dame they said was a call girl was strangled in the 80th Street building. What a nightmare! The police nearly drove me and everybody else crazy, and the vacancy rate went up twenty percent."

"He asked me if I knew anything about them," I said. "I told him everything I could think of, except that Sylvester at the bank happened to mention the other day that they were having a cash-flow problem. I thought it would be better to let the police get that from him."

"Absolutely right," said Mr. Bandsberg. "Cooperate, we always cooperate with the city, but don't stick your neck out. Just call Ernest and make sure they haven't arrested him." Ernest is the hall man at the Mittler.

"Okay," I said. "But I don't see how it can have anything to do with us."

"Just wait," said Mr. Bandsberg. "You will."

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Mr. Bandsberg is always prepared for the worst. I should have realized that's because he's had a lot of experience.

When I got back to my office and put in a call to the Mittler lobby, a policeman answered and had to be persuaded that I wasn't a reporter. Finally I got Ernest. "How is everything going?" I said.

"Well, Miss Nelson, the situation is somewhat confused," he said. Ernest talks like that. He worked on Park Avenue before automation set in. "They have just removed the body. Very sad."

"Have you any idea what happened?" I said.

"None at all, Miss Nelson. I was at lunch during the relevant period. Harry was on duty."

We have found that it pays to have someone in the Mittler lobby at all times. The Mittler is too small and too old to appeal to the kind of companies that can provide their own security. Our best tenant prospects are small advertising agencies, sales representatives, and so on, who like the Mittler because it's near Grand Central Station. When the pilfering in offices began to be a way of life, we hired Ernest. He keeps an eye out for doubtful-looking types and checks anyone trying to carry out equipment, and we feel that he has a deterrent effect, like nuclear armament. Harry, who does general maintenance for us, relieves him at lunchtime.

"Let me know if you have any trouble," I said. "Is Harry there? Could I speak to him?"

"I believe the police have stopped questioning him for the moment," said Ernest. "Harry!"

"Hello, Miss Nelson," said Harry. He sounded upset.

"Are you having a bad time?" I said.

"I keep telling them, I didn't see nothing," said Harry. There is no Park Avenue in Harry's background, although he is a very good maintenance man. "This is an awful thing, I says to them, do you think I wouldn't tell you if I seen anything? The only funny thing I seen, I seen a messenger with gloves on. I mean, he must have been a messenger, he had one of them envelopes like messengers carry, and he looked at the directory and got on the elevator, and a couple of minutes later he came down again and I didn't see no envelope no more."

"Why shouldn't a messenger have gloves on?" I said.

"It's June, Miss Nelson," Harry said. "Them guys that work as messengers, they ain't what you'd call millionaires. They don't dress fancy. They might put on gloves in December, but not in the summer. I figure he didn't want to leave prints. The first guy I told it to, he

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didn't want to listen, but that Lieutenant O'Reilly, he thinks maybe I've got something."

"Let's hope so," I said. "It's a bad business. Did you get to that leaky pipe before all this happened?"

"No, I was hung up with them stairs in 219," said Harry. "I'll fix it tomorrow."

I tried to get back to my sales letter, but I couldn't concentrate on it. I was positively glad to be interrupted by Glenda. She had found out what had happened, and wanted to send flowers to someone. We send flowers a lot in the real-estate business. By the time I had persuaded her that there was no appropriate recipient in this instance, I was relieved to discover that the afternoon was nearly over.

Since there seemed to be nothing I could do about it, I would have liked to put Mary's death out of my mind. But there was no escaping the newspapers, television, and gossip. During the next few days I became quite well informed about the poor girl and what had happened to her.

She had been 26 years old, had lived with her mother and an older sister in a New Jersey suburb, and had been engaged to a young man employed as a computer programmer at a large Wall Street firm. She had worked for Ballden ever since leaving secretarial school, and had been combining the duties of secretary and office manager at BH&S.

It had been her custom to bring a lunch to eat in the office, and she had done so on the day of her death. She had been nervous about being alone in the office, and when all three men went out, as they had done on the day in question, she ordinarily locked the main door. At BH&S's request we had installed a large mail slot so that she had no need to open the door to receive most deliveries. Harris and a visiting printer's representative, who had been the last to leave that day, at 12:30 (confirmed by Ernest, who had seen them leave the lobby just before going to lunch himself), agreed that she had pushed the latch as they departed.

At 12:40 her fiancé had telephoned her from his office, where he was spending his lunch hour with a colleague, to discuss plans for the evening. He said she had seemed just as usual.

Ballden, the first to return to the office, at about 1:45, had found her lying beside her desk, shot once through the head. There was no sign of a struggle before or after death. The weapon, apparently a revolver, was missing. Her handbag was lying open beside her,

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with the wallet gone. (It later turned up in a nearby mailbox, wiped of fingerprints and containing no cash.) The office door had been locked when Ballden returned and did not appear to have been forced.

No one in the building remembered hearing a shot, but since there was construction going on in the street, not to mention the normal midtown traffic noises, this was hardly surprising.

The police were appealing for any information about a gray-haired man, probably a messenger, wearing a blue jacket and gray gloves, who was believed to have been in the area about one o'clock.

During the time that I was unwillingly soaking up information about the crime, I was also learning what Mr. Bandsberg meant about the disadvantages of murder from a building-management point of view.

First, I had to find another relief for Ernest, because the police had Harry down at headquarters helping the police artist make a drawing of the gloved messenger and looking at photographs of known pilferers and armed robbers—unsuccessfully, so he told me.

Then a good prospect we had lined up for a vacancy in the Mittler Building called and said he'd decided to stay where he was for a while longer. I didn't ask him why—what good would it have done?

That was the same day the police artist's drawing of the messenger appeared in the newspapers and on TV. There didn't seem to be anything distinctive about him except for bushy gray hair and eyebrows and rather puffy cheeks.

Two days later Harry phoned and said he had to go down to headquarters again, he didn't know what for.

Early the next morning I got a call from his wife.

"Miss Nelson, can't you do something with them police?" she said. I asked what the trouble was.

"Miss Nelson, them police are after Harry. They can't find that man he says he saw, and now they think he made it all up and he had something to do with that poor girl being killed. They had him down there for hours yesterday asking him how well he knew her and was he really in the hall all the time he was supposed to be. He's so upset he threw up last night when he got home. And somebody's been around here asking the neighbors is he a good family man and did he ever make any passes at the local girls. You and I know he wouldn't do such a thing, but who can talk to them police? Can't you and Mr. Bandsberg do something?"

"I'll try," I said. "Tell Harry I'm sorry."

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"He don't want to go into that building no more. He says it makes him sick. He'd be mad if he knew I called you, but I say it's not fair when he hasn't done anything wrong."

"I'm glad you called," I said. "I don't control the police, naturally, but I'll see what I can do."

I found O'Reilly's card and called his number. To my surprise he was in.

"I hope you won't think I'm trying to interfere," I said, "but I'm concerned about Harry Mannes. He's a good employee, and I just had a call from his wife saying you've been questioning him in what might be called an unfriendly way."

"We've been questioning everybody," said O'Reilly. He sounded tired. "You know it's not policy to interfere with business if we can help it."

"We checked his references very carefully when he came to us," I said. "You have to with handymen, they're in and out of all kinds of places. He had a very good record and he does with us too."

"He seems like a nice guy," O'Reilly said, rather to my surprise. I didn't expect an everyday remark like that from a police detective. "Only thing is, this messenger story."

"What's the matter with it?"

"I won't be telling you anything every reporter in town doesn't know if I say we can't find him, and we're not so sure he exists. Nobody besides Mannes admits to seeing him, although a couple of people think they might have. None of the messenger services had sent anybody like that to the building."

"It doesn't have to have been a real messenger, does it?"

"No. But we don't have any perpetrator like that in the files, either. I'll give you a little more stale news and tell you we're stuck. The girl's background was perfectly okay. There wasn't any trouble with the family or the fiancé, and anyhow they're accounted for. Ditto the men at her office. Mannes himself and your hall man agree they'd left and didn't come back until she'd been dead for at least half an hour. Even if there were any reason to think they'd shoot her, and we haven't found any."

"I thought she was robbed," I said.

"That could have been a blind," said O'Reilly. "You're in building management, you must know as well as I do that this isn't typical pilfering or typical armed robbery either. And why should she have opened the door? She locked it in the first place because she was nervous. But she would have opened it for Mannes, she knew him,

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or he could have let himself in with his master key. You understand, we're not accusing him. Only sometimes people who claim to have seen something have a reason."

"I now understand the Kitty Genovese case better than I used to," I said.

"Now don't get sore because I'm frank with you, Miss Nelson," said O'Reilly. "I'm just doing my job. We have to try everything in a case like this."

Getting on the wrong side of O'Reilly, I realized, was not going to help anybody. "I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't think we don't value your opinion," said O'Reilly.

"Thank you," I said. We exchanged a few more courtesies before we hung up.

I didn't seem to have helped Harry much.

I could see how O'Reilly felt. The picture he was looking at didn't make sense, and he was bound to try to make adjustments in it. Disbelieving Harry and considering him the chief suspect was a nice simple adjustment that would cover most of the facts.

But that can't be the only possible explanation, I thought. There must be others. If I can't think of two or three more to suggest to O'Reilly, I'm not the woman who worked out the complicated joint leasing arrangement for Gregson and Phyfe.

I went down to the coffee shop in the lobby and sat in a back booth. You can't really think in the office, the phone rings too often. I drank several cups of coffee and wrote on and tore up several pages from my notebook.

By the time I thought I had something, it was lunchtime, but I had no appetite.

I went back to the office and called O'Reilly again. He was out, and they didn't know when he would be back.

I checked invoices and typed a few letters.

Finally, about 3:00, O'Reilly called.

"Could I make a suggestion," I said.

"You might as well," said O'Reilly. "Everybody else does."

"It's no good if all the BH&S partners are accounted for every minute of the lunch hour."

"They're not."

"In that case—" and I told him my idea.

"I suppose it could be," he said. "If you're right, where do you think the things would be?"

This was better than I had hoped. "There are lots of possibilities,"

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I said, thinking fast, "but if I had done it I think I would have left them in a locker in Grand Central. They'd be taken away eventually and sold."

"Well, that's very interesting, Miss Nelson," said O'Reilly. "Thank you."

I didn't dare ask him if he was going to take any action.

No sooner had I hung up than I got a call from someone interested in some space that I'd been trying to unload for months, and immediately after that came an agonized wail from a tenant whose air conditioning was out of order. These developments kept Harry and me busy for the rest of the day and I had almost forgotten about the murder when I walked into the office the next morning with a signed contract in my briefcase. Glenda stopped me as I was passing her desk.

"That Lieutenant Aurelio called you," she said. "He says he'll call back this afternoon. He said tell you bull's-eye, whatever that means."

"Bull's-eye?" I said.

"That's right," said Glenda. "He spelled it and made me spell it back to him."

Fortunately I've had lots of training in not showing excitement when things go according to plan.

"Put him right through when he calls, will you?" I said.

The call came in about half an hour.

"Good thinking, Miss Nelson," O'Reilly said. "It was there among the stuff collected from the lockers. One of those airline bags, with the jacket and gloves and a gray wig and eyebrows, and the cotton he used to stuff his cheeks. There was a long blond wig and a woman's scarf too—I guess that was to throw whoever finally opened the bag off the track. The gun wasn't there. He must have ditched it somewhere. But his prints were all over the bag. He'll get around to telling us what he did with the gun. We arrested him two hours ago."

"Harris?" I said.

"How did you know it would be him?"

"The hair on the back of his hands," I said. "Somebody might have recognized him by it. That's why he wore the gloves. The others would have had no reason to. None of them had to be afraid of leaving fingerprints—it was natural for their prints to be there anyway."

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

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"Are you there?" I said.

"Yes," said O'Reilly. "I'm here. I just don't know what to say. Frankly I ought to have thought of it myself." He paused again. "Well, thanks," he said.

"Thanks for listening to me."

"My pleasure," said O'Reilly. "Well, goodbye."

Harris confessed. It seemed that he had been forcing the company's suppliers to pad their bills and kick back to him—the small profits BH&S had been making didn't permit him to keep up his lifestyle. Mary had become suspicious of the padded bills, and he knew that she was devoted to Ballden and would tell him. Harris realized that if it all came out he would, at the least, be dropped from the firm and ruined in the business.

He got the wigs and the clothes together and stashed them in a Grand Central locker, and as soon as he knew that Mary would be alone in the office at lunchtime he put his plan into execution. He parted from the printer's representative outside the building, went to Grand Central and got the bag from the locker, changed in the men's room, put his own jacket in the bag and the bag back in a locker, returned to the office, opened the door with his key—each partner had one—and shot Mary as she sat at her desk, using his Army revolver.

He put the revolver in the envelope he'd brought with him and slipped it under his jacket along with the wallet he had taken from Mary's purse to suggest robbery. Then he returned to Grand Central, slipping the revolver into a trash can and the wallet into a mailbox on the way. At the station he changed back into the up-and-coming advertising man and went about his business.

Harry is a hero now, because he noticed the gloves. He brags a bit about how much he helped the police. He says he never did like Harris.

The other day O'Reilly sent me a dozen roses at the office. Glenda saw the card, naturally—she sees everything.

"Gee, this O'Reilly must be a nice fellow, Lizzie," she said. "But it's too bad that Lieutenant Aurelio doesn't come around any more. Didn't you think he was good-looking?"

"Q"

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Gravell was a fat cat ready to be taken . . .

THE RINGER

by JOHN ABBOTT

"I wouldn't try any cute stuff with him," Obie advised. "Gravell didn't get where he is by taking too many wooden nickels." His frantic semaphore caught the flickering eye of the waitress; she side-glided through the congestion at the bar and ordered us another round.

"That's just it, Obie. Gravell is a fat cat, ready to be taken. We separate him from several big ones and New York City is our next stop."

"Sure sounds good." Despite his cautious nature, Obie was getting interested. "But we have a serious cash shortage. Without some financial leverage, we can't go up against Gravell—or anyone else."

"We won't need it," I assured him. "Not this time."

We fell silent as the drinks arrived. She's a good waitress, but an incurable gossip. I made the tip small enough to discourage amenities; she spurted away from the table as if fearful I might renege.

Obie hunched forward conspiratorially. "We split fifty-fifty, as usual?"

I nodded approvingly. "After a thousand-dollar share is paid out to Needlenose Bowman."

"The jockey?" Obie's shaggy mass of brown ringlets shook violently. "You got some idea of fixing a horse race, you deal me out. There's a heavy fall for that kind of action, and I'm not taking it." He half rose from his chair.

"Simmer down." I eased him into his former posture. "I'm surprised at you for even thinking the noble Mr. Bowman would consider affecting the honest outcome of a race. The only thing Bowman is going to help us fix is Gravell. Now what do you say?"

He glanced around, caught the waitress's eye, and raised two fingers. That meant he would listen. Twenty minutes later we snicked glasses to seal the partnership.

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"To Gravell and his money," Obie toasted.

"And his greed," I added.

We'd need Gravell's lust for loot to help us pry open his bulging racketeer's wallet.

Some of the gold leaf had flecked from the lettering on the office door. Somehow it gave the sign a look of permanence, like creeping vines on a house.

G. GRAVELL—INVESTMENT BROKER

I grinned at Gravell's pitch for respectability, opened the door without knocking, and startled his secretary into dropping the dauber she held over a wetly gleaming forefinger.

"I'd like to see Mr. Gravell," I told her. "It's very important."

She looked skeptical. Her blatant inspection of my off-the-racks suit did nothing to reassure her. "May I tell him the nature of your business?"

"Mutual profitability," I told her.

I don't think she caught all of it, but the profit part was enough to galvanize her into action. She set the dauber back into the bottle and got to her feet.

"I'll see if he's in," she said, the wet nails waving me to a seat. As she passed me I thrust a business card at her, which she accepted like a nurse wishing she had forceps.

Gravell let me simmer for ten minutes, then had her usher me in. His massive bulk (musclebound ex-bouncer lapsing to lard) seemed like an extension of his huge desk. He kept turning the business card over and studying it as if some further explanation was to be found on its blank side.

"Sit down," he said, echoing the secretary's lack of enthusiasm. Now he was studying the front of the card. "You own the Triple-R Stables?"

"Yes." I shrugged modestly. "What's left of them. We came to town with eight racing horses, but lost three to a viral infection. It's been a very bad meet for us: fourteen starts and not even one fourth-place purse."

He grunted sympathetically. "Most unfortunate, I'm sure. But I don't understand how this concerns me." He was squirming with impatience; in a minute he'd plead an urgent appointment.

"On Friday, which is closing day, one of our horses is entered in a sprint race. He's already been beaten twice, and is certain to be thrashed again. He should go off in the wagering at odds of 40–1,

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perhaps even higher. And he shall win the race, Mr. Gravell, he shall win it."

He sighed wearily. "Your faith in the nag's chances is understandable, Mr. Miller. I'm sure every owner has this blind spot where his horse is concerned. But your enthusiasm is baffling—you just told me the horse is certain to lose again."

"He is. Except for one thing." I leaned forward, placing the tips of my fingers on the gleaming edge of his desk. He was primed now, but I paused a moment, stretching him out, before delivering the bomb. "We're bringing in a ringer."

The card dropped from his fingers; he stopped squirming. His face betrayed nothing, the professional gambler's inscrutable mask firmly in place, but I could hear the cash register ringing inside his skull.

"I know little," he lied, "about racetrack procedures and terminology. I believe that a ringer is a horse—sometimes an identical twin—that is altered cosmetically to resemble another."

"Correct."

"And this look-alike, blessed with the speed your horse lacks, will race in his place?"

"You're getting the picture."

He exhaled expansively. "Ah, but you are not. As each horse enters the track for the post parade and warmup, the track veterinarian examines the tattoo each horse has inside his mouth. This identification procedure was made necessary because so many past owners were bringing in ringers. Surely you know this?"

"I know something else. If during the warmup a faulty piece of equipment is noted, a horse is permitted to return to the barn for quick minor repairs. Upon his reentering the track he is not reexamined, but merely joins the other horses in warming up.

"We plan to send out the slow horse; then, when the jockey discovers a faulty stirrup, the lead pony will walk him back to the barn and bring back the speed horse, the jockey having changed mounts in those few moments."

"My word, you know, it just might work," Gravell conceded. "Yes sir, I believe you might have something going for you."

"It will work," I emphasized. "A similar equipment-failure situation occurred just four days ago—only quite innocently, I'm sure."

I don't believe he heard me. Gravell's thoughts were jumping ahead to Friday, the long odds, and his chance of joining the financial coup.

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"You've told me all this for a purpose. It's time I learned just what you want from me."

"We're offering you an opportunity to share in the killing."

"I can see *that*—otherwise, you wouldn't have told me so much—but why me?"

"Don't you remember?" I asked with mild reproof. "I told you we've suffered severe financial losses. Bringing in the ringer on closing day will enable us to recoup, but we need money with which to attack the pari-mutuel windows."

"Ah."

He seemed almost relieved it was finally out in the open.

"With five thousand dollars from you we can bombard the win, place, and show windows and clean up on our horse. You, being at the track with my partner, can make a similar killing. How much just depends on the amount you wish to wager."

"I'm afraid," he said, "your enthusiasm—or desperation—has betrayed you. Consider what I know now: your stable's name, the day of the race, the distance of the race, and your horse's deplorable record. A brief examination of the day's racing program would reveal the only thing I lack—the horse's name. Once I learned that, I could bet a bundle on the horse without financing you at all." He leaned back, obviously enjoying himself.

"You could, if—" I paused to let that big two-letter word rattle his confidence "—if you knew for a certainty that the change of horses had been successfully made back at the barn. But even we can't be a hundred percent sure of making the switch. There could be a last-minute bind—some track officials, say, visiting the paddock area, or some snooping busybody from another stable. No, it's only when the horse and jockey reenter the track that I'll be able to flash a subtle signal to my confederate sitting in the stands—hopefully with you—that you'll know the ringer is in the race."

"Good planning," Gravell admitted grudgingly. "I wouldn't want to bet on the plug thinking it was the ringer."

"Exactly. While waiting for the horse to come back on the track, you'll place an envelope containing five thousand dollars—our betting money—in your lap. If my friend removes the envelope, that's your signal we've done it. You'll then have approximately five minutes to place your wagers—not very much time."

"Don't you worry about me. I can move when I have to."

"Good. Now, let's discuss your rendezvous at the track with my partner . . . "

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I met Obie at the bus depot. He came in patting his coat pocket affectionately. "I got it," he beamed. "Let's go."

"No hitch?"

"None. Once I took the envelope, his eyes lit up like a kid's at Christmas. He was outta that seat like a rocket."

"Well, Needlenose did a good job. When that old stirrup gave way, his distress certainly looked genuine."

Obie laughed. "It sure did. When he rode back onto the track and gave you the signal that you flashed on to me, I was so caught up in the routine that for a moment I thought he really *was* on a ringer."

"So did Gravell, thank goodness. But, as I told you, Needlenose is an honest jockey—he'd never do anything to affect the honest outcome of a race."

"I think," Obie said, "we should have a drink to honesty and cooperative jockeys."

"No time," I said pointing. "Here comes our bus."

"How do you know?" he challenged. "They all look alike. This one might be ours or it might be—a ringer."

For that crack, he could pay for the drinks.

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam: Johnson story by

LILLIAN de la TORRE

In which the great Dr. Sam: Johnson and James Boswell ("Bozzy") meet for the first time and how their memorable meeting led to the investigation of an Eighteenth Century locked-room mystery—"this dreadful riddle . . . in an apartment locked and barred!" How could it be? Did the Devil do it? If not the Devil—"There's more in this," Dr. Johnson knew, "than meets the eye" . . .

You will find an interesting Author's Comment at the end of this tale . . .

MURDER LOCK'D IN

(as told by James Boswell, May, 1763)

by LILLIAN de la TORRE

"*Murder! Murder lock'd in!*"

With these horrifying words began my first experience of the *detective* genius of the great Dr. Sam: Johnson, him who—but let us proceed in order.

The '63 was to me a memorable year; for in it I had the happiness to obtain the acquaintance of that extraordinary man. Though then but a raw Scotch lad of two-and-twenty, I had already read the WORKS OF JOHNSON with delight and instruction, and imbibed therefrom the highest reverence for their authour. Coming up to London in that year, I came with the firm resolution to win my way into his friendship.

On Monday, the 16th of May, I was sitting in the back-parlour of Tom Davies, book-seller and sometime actor, when the man I

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sought to meet came unexpectedly into the shop. Glimpsing him through the glass-door, Davies in sepulchral tone announced his approach as of Hamlet's ghost: "Look, my Lord, it comes!"

I scrambled to my feet as the great man entered, his tall, burly form clad in mulberry stuff of full-skirted antique cut, a large bushy greyish wig surmounting his strong-cut features of classical mould.

"I present Mr. Boswell—" began Davies. If he intended to add "from Scotland," I cut him off.

"Don't tell him where I come from!" I cried, having heard of the great man's prejudice against Scots.

"From Scotland!" cried Davies roguishly.

"Mr. Johnson," said I—for not yet had he become "Doctor" Johnson, though as such I shall always think of him—"Mr. Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it."

"That, sir, I find," quipped Johnson with a smile, "is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help!"

This jest, I knew, was aimed at the hordes of place-seekers who "could not help coming from" Scotland to seek their fortunes in London when Scottish Lord Bute became first minister to the new King; but it put me out of countenance.

"Don't be uneasy," Davies whispered me at parting, "I can see he likes you very well!"

Thus encouraged, I made bold to wait upon the philosopher the very next Sunday, in his chambers in the Temple, where the benchers of the law hold sway. I strode along Fleet Street, clad in my best; my new bloom-coloured coat, so I flattered myself, setting off my neat form and dark, sharp-cut features. As I walked along, I savoured in anticipation this, my first encounter with the lion in his den, surrounded by his learned volumes and the tools of his trade.

But it was not yet to be, for as I turned under the arch into Inner Temple Lane, I encountered the philosopher issuing from his doorway in full Sunday panoply. His mulberry coat was well brushed, his full-bottom wig was new-powdered, he wore a clean linen neckcloth and ruffles to his wrists.

"Welcome, Mr. Boswell," said he cordially, "you are welcome to the Temple. As you see, I am just now going forth. Will you not walk along with me? I go to wait on Mistress Lennon the poetess, who dwells here in the Temple, but a step across the gardens, in Bayfield Court. Come, I will present you at her levee."

"With all my heart, sir," said I, pleased to go among the wits, and in such company.

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But as it turned out, I never did present myself at the literary levee, for as we came to Bayfield Court, a knot of people buzzing about the door caught us up in their concerns.

"Well met, Mr. Johnson," called a voice, "we have need of your counsel. We have sent for the watch, but he does not come, the sluggard."

"The watch? What's amiss, ma'am?"

A babble of voices answered him. Every charwoman known to Bayfield Court, it seemed, seethed in a swarm before the entry.

"Old Mrs. Duncom—locked in, and hears no knock—here's Mrs. Taffety come to dine—"

A dozen hands pushed forward an agitated lady in a capuchin.

"Invited, Mr. Johnson, two o'clock the hour, and Mrs. Duncom don't answer. I fear the old maid is ill and the young maid is gone to fetch the surgeon, and Mrs. Duncom you know has not the use of her limbs."

"We must rouse her. Come, Mrs. Taffety, I'll make myself heard, I warrant."

The whole feminine contingent, abandoning hope of the watch, escorted us up the stair. As we mounted, I took stock of our posse. The benchers of the law, their employers, were off on their Sunday occasions, but the servitors were present in force. I saw an Irish wench with red hair and a turned-up nose, flanked close by a couple of lanky, ill-conditioned lads, probably sculls to the benchers and certainly admirers to the wench. A dark wiry little gypsy of a woman with alert black eyes boosted along a sturdy motherly soul addressed by all as Aunt Moll. Sukey and Win and Juggy, twittering to each other, followed after.

Arrived at the attick landing, Dr. Johnson raised his voice and called upon Mrs. Duncom in rolling stentorian tones. Mrs. Taffety seconded him, invoking the maids in a thin screech: "Betty! Annet!" Dead silence answered them.

"Then we must break in the door." said Dr. Johnson.

Indeed he looked abundantly capable of effecting such a feat single-handed; but at that moment a stumble of feet upon the stair proclaimed the arrival of the watch. "Hold!" cried that worthy. "None of your assault and battery, for I'll undertake to spring the lock."

"Will you so?" said Dr. Johnson, eyeing him thoughtfully.

The watch was no Bow Street constable, but one of the Temple guardians, a stubby old man in a seedy fustian coat, girded with a

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broad leather belt from which depended his short sword and his truncheon of office.

The women regarded him admiringly as he stepped forward, full of self-importance, and made play with a kind of skewer which he thrust into the lock.

Nothing happened.

After considerable probing and coaxing the man was fain to desist.

"'Tis plain, sir," he covered his failure, "that the door is bolted from within."

"Bolted!" cried Mrs. Taffety. "Of course 'tis bolted! Mistress Duncom ever barred herself in like a fortress, for she kept a fortune in broad pieces under her bed in a silver tankard, and so she went ever in fear of robbers."

"How came you to know of this fortune, ma'am?" demanded Dr. Johnson.

"Why, sir, the whole world knew, 'twas no secret."

"It ought to have been. Well, fortress or no, it appears we must break in."

"Hold, sir!" cried the black-eyed charwoman. "You'll affright the old lady into fits. I know a better way."

"Name it, then, ma'am."

"My master Grisley's chambers, you must know, sir, lie on the other side of the court—"

"Ah, Mr. Grisley!" murmured Aunt Moll. "Pity he's not to the fore, he'd set us right, I warrant, he's that fond of Annet!"

"Mr. Grisley is from home. But I have the key. Now if I get out at his dormer, I'll make my way easily round the parapet, and so get in at Mrs. Duncom's casement and find out what's amiss."

"Well thought on, Mistress Oliver," approved the watch, "for the benchers of the Temple would take it ill, was we to go banging in doors."

"And how if the casement be bolted and barred, as surely it will be?"

"Then, Mrs. Taffety, I must make shift. Wait here. I'll not be long."

Waiting on the landing, we fell silent, listening for we knew not what. When it came, it startled us—a crash, and the tinkle of falling glass.

"Alack, has she fallen?"

"Not so, ma'am, she has made shift. Now she's within, soon she'll shoot the great bolt and admit us."

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We waited at the door in suspense. After an interminable minute, the lock turned, and we heard someone wrenching at the bolt. It stuck; then with a shriek it grated grudgingly back, and the heavy door swung slowly in.

On the threshold stood Mrs. Oliver, rigid and staring. Her lips moved, but no sound came.

"In God's name, what is it?" cried Mrs. Taffety in alarm.

Mrs. Oliver found a hoarse whisper:

"Murder!" she gasped. "Murder lock'd in!"

Her eyes rolled up in her head, her knees gave way, and she collapsed in a huddle in the doorway.

"Let me, sirs." The motherly female stepped forward. "When Katty's in her fits, I know how to deal."

Leaving her to deal, the rest of us pressed in, Dr. Johnson, myself, the watch, and the fluttering women. The Irish girl was with us, but her swains, the sculls, I noted, had vanished.

What a sight met our eyes! The young maid's pallet was made up in the passage, by the inner door as if to guard it, and there lay Annet in her blood. She had fought for her life, for blood was everywhere, but repeated blows of an axe or hammer had broke her head and quelled her forever.

In the inner room old Mrs. Duncom lay strangled. The noose was still around her neck. In the other bed old Betty had suffered the same fate. Of the silver tankard there was no trace.

"Murder and robbery! We must send for the Bow Street men!" I cried.

"Not in my bailiwick!" growled the Temple watchman. "*I* am the law in Bayfield Court!"

"So he is, Mr. Boswell," assented Dr. Johnson. "Well, well, if we put our minds to it, we may make shift to unravel this dreadful riddle for ourselves—three women dead in an apartment locked and barred!"

Cold air touched me, and a shudder shook me. The icy air was no ghostly miasma, I soon saw, but a chill spring breeze from the casement, where the small old-fashioned panes nearest the bolt had been shattered when entrance was effected.

"The window was bolted, I told you so!" cried Mrs. Taffety. "Every bolt set! The Devil is in it!"

"The Devil—the Devil!" the charwomen took up the chorus.

"Y'are foolish females!" said the watch stoutly. "Look you, Mr. Johnson, I'll undertake to shew you how 'twas done."

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"I thank you, my man—"

"Jonas Mudge, sir, at your service."

"I thank you, honest Mudge, pray instruct me, for I am ever happy to be instructed."

"Then behold, sir! I take this string—" It came out of his capacious pocket with a conjurer's flourish at which the females gaped. "Now pray step this way, sir (leading us to the outer door). Now mark me! I loop my string around the knob of the bolt—I step outside, pray follow—"

On the outside landing Mistress Katty Oliver was sitting propped against the wall with closed eyes, and her friend was assiduously fanning her. They paid us no mind. Lowering his tone, Mudge continued his lecture:

"I bring the two ends of the string with me—I close the door. Now I will pull on both ends of the string, which will shoot the bolt—and so I shall have only to pull away the string by one end, the door is bolted, and I stand outside. As thus—"

As he spoke, he pulled on the two ends of the string. Nothing happened. The unwieldly bolt stuck, and no force applied to the string could budge it.

"An old trick, not always to be relied upon," smiled Dr. Johnson. "I thank you, sir, for demonstrating how this strange feat was *not* accomplished!"

As Mudge stood there looking foolish, there was a clatter on the stair, and three gentlemen arrived on the run. The benchers had come back from Commons. Dr. Johnson knew them all, the red-faced one, the exquisite one, the melancholy one, and greeted each in turn.

"What, Mr. Kerry, Mr. Geegan, Mr. Grisley, you come in an unhappy time."

"Your servant, Mr. Johnson, what's amiss?"

Mistress Oliver was on her feet, her hand on his arm.

"Don't go in, Mr. Grisley, for God's sake don't go in. Come away, I'll fetch you a tot, come away."

"Alack, sirs, murder's amiss!" I blurted.

The two young benchers were through the door in an instant, and the melancholy Grisley shook off his maid's hand and followed. When his eye lit on Annet's bloody brow, he cried aloud.

"Cover her face! For God's sake cover her face!"

Quick hands drew up the crimsoned bed-cloathes, and so we found the hammer. Dr. Johnson's shapely strong fingers handled it gin-

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gerly, bringing it close to his near-sighted eyes.

"An ordinary hammer. What can it tell us?"

"Perhaps much, for I perceive there's an initial burned in the wood of the handle," said I, feeling pleased with myself. "A G, sir, if I mistake not."

"A G. Yours, Mr. Geegan?"

The exquisite youth jibbed in alarm.

"Not mine, Divil a whit, no, sir, not mine!"

"Mr. Grisley?"

"I cannot look on it, do not ask me. Kat will know."

The little dark woman took his hand and spoke soothingly to him.

"I think, sir, 'tis the one you lent to Mr. Kerry some days since."

"To me!" cried the ruddy-faced bencher. "You lie, you trull!"

"I don't lie," said the woman angrily. "Don't you remember, you sent your charwoman for it, I gave it to Biddy to knock in some nails?" In a sudden silence, all eyes turned to the red-haired girl.

"No, sir, I never!" she cried in alarm.

"Go off, you trull!" bawled the alarmed Kerry. "I dismiss you! So you may e'en fetch your bundle and be off with you!"

"Nay, sir, not so fast, she must remain!" remonstrated the watch.

"Not in my chambers, the d—d trull! She may take up her bundle outside my door, and be d—d to her!"

I perceived that Mr. Kerry had come from Commons not a little pot-valiant, and thought it good riddance when he stamped off.

Biddy gave us one scared look, and followed him. Young Geegan seemed minded to go along, but was prevented by the arrival of Mudge's mate of the watch. Leather-belted, truncheon in hand, flat and expressionless of face, there he stood, filling the doorway and saying nothing. It gave us a sinister feeling of being under guard in that chamber of death. Mrs. Taffety fell to sobbing, and the women to comforting her. Dr. Johnson was probing the chimneys, neither deterred nor assisted by the blank-faced watchman, when suddenly Mr. Kerry was back again, redder than ever, hauling a reluctant Biddy by the wrist, and in his free hand brandishing a silver tankard,

"'Tis Mrs. Duncom's!" cried Mrs. Taffety.

"Hid in Biddy's bundle! I knew it, the trull!"

The wretched Biddy began to snivel.

"I had it for a gift," she wept. "I did not know murder was in it!"

Dr. Johnson took her in hand: "Who gave it you?"

"My f-friends."

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"What friends?"

Biddy was loath to say, but the philosopher prevailed by sheer moral force, and Biddy confessed:

"The Sander brothers. Scouts to the benchers. Them that's gone off."

"They shall be found. And what did you do for them?"

"I—" The girl's resistance was broken. "I kept watch on the stair."

Then it came with a rush: "When Annet went in the evening for some wine to make the old lady's nightly posset, she left the door on the jar as was her wont, that she might come in again without disturbing old Betty; and knowing it would be so, Matt Sander, that's the puny one, he slips in and hides under the bed. When all is still, he lets in his brother, and I keep watch on the stair, and they come out with the tankard of broad pieces—" The wretched girl began to bawl. "They swore to me they had done no murder, only bound and gagged the folk for safety's sake."

"And when they came out," pursued Dr. Johnson, "they shot the bolt from outside. How did they do that?"

"I know not what you mean, sir. They pulled the door to, 'tis a spring lock, I heard it snick shut, and so we came away and shared out in the archway below."

"Which of them carried the hammer?"

"Neither, sir, for what would they need a hammer?"

Then realization flooded her, and she bawled louder, looking wildly about for a refuge. Suddenly, defiantly, Mr. Geegan stepped forward and took her in his arms.

"So, Mr. Johnson," said watchman Mudge smugly, "our problem is solved, we had no need of Bow Street! You come along of me, Mistress Biddy. Nay, let go, sir." Mr. Geegan reluctantly obeyed. "Pray, Mr. Johnson, do you remain here, I'll fetch the crowner to sit on the bodies."

"Do so, good friend. I'll desire all those present—" his eye took in the three benchers and the huddling women "—to bear me company till he comes. Bucket will stand by to keep order. Come, friends, we shall sit more at our ease in the dining room. After you, ma'am. After you, sir."

They went without demur, all save Grisley. In the passage, by Annet's still form on her pallet, he balked. "Shall she lie alone?" he cried piteously. "I'll stay by her while I may."

"And I by you," said Kat Oliver.

Her master sank to the hallway bench, wringing his hands and

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crying: "O Annet, Annet, why did you not admit me? I might have saved you!"

"Come, sir," soothed his maid, "be easy, you could do nothing."

We left them fallen silent on the bench. Instead of following the others into the dining room, Dr. Johnson led me back into the inner chamber, where two bodies lay coldly blown upon from the broken window panes.

JOHNSON There's more in this, Mr. Boswell, than meets the eye.

BOSWELL Did not the Sanders do it?

JOHNSON And got out through a door locked and barred, and left it so? Biddy saw no hocussing of the lock, and I question whether they knew how to do it.

BOSWELL Mudge knew how. Were they in it together? I ask myself, sir, what is this guardian of the Temple peace, that carries a picklock in his pocket, and knows how to shoot a bolt from without? I smell Newgate on him.

JOHNSON You may be right, sir. They are a queer lot, the Temple watch. But this one is no wizard, he could neither, in the event, pick the lock nor shoot the bolt.

BOSWELL Then how was it done? This seems an impossible crime.

JOHNSON 'Twas all too possible, sir, for it happened.

BOSWELL The women are right, the Devil did it.

JOHNSON A devil did it indeed, but in human form.

BOSWELL One who got in through bolts and bars, and got out again leaving all locked and barred behind him?

JOHNSON There was a way in, for someone got in, and a way out too, that's plain to a demonstration. We must find it.

BOSWELL I am at a loss, sir. Where must we look?

JOHNSON We must look where all answers are found, sir, in our own heads. Perpend, sir. Murder in a locked dwelling, and no murderer there to take—'tis a pretty mystery, and this one the more complex because it is triple. Let us consider the problem at large. Many answers are possible.

BOSWELL (ruefully) In *my* head, sir, I don't find even one.

JOHNSON Well, sir, here's one: Perhaps there is no murderer there to take, because there is no murder, only accident that looks like murder.

BOSWELL Two old women simultaneously strangle themselves by accident, while the young one accidentally falls afoul of a hammer? Come, sir, this is to stretch coincidence and multiply impossibilities!

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JOHNSON Granted, Mr. Boswell. Then is it perhaps double murder and suicide behind bolted doors?
BOSWELL Suicide by the hammer? Unheard of!
JOHNSON And nigh on impossible. Well, then, sir, was the tragedy engineered from without, and no murderer ever entered at all?
BOSWELL The nooses were tightened and the hammer wielded, by someone on the wrong side of the door? This is witchcraft and sorcery, nothing less.
JOHNSON Then suppose there is no murder, the victim is only stunned or stupefied, until the person who breaks in commits it?
BOSWELL *Three* murders, sir, and the third a noisy one, all in the one minute while we listened at the door? Come, sir, these conjectures are ingenious, but none fits this case.
JOHNSON Then there must be a way in, and a way out. Think, Mr. Boswell: all is not so locked and sealed, but holes exist.
BOSWELL I have it! The keyhole!
JOHNSON A keyhole that not even a picklock could penetrate? Think again, sir. What else?
BOSWELL Nay, I know not, sir. There is no scuttle to the roof.
JOHNSON There is not, sir.
BOSWELL And the chimneys are narrow, and stuffed with soot undisturbed.
JOHNSON So we saw. Not the chimneys. Good. We progress.
BOSWELL How, progress?
JOHNSON When one has eliminated all impossibilities, then what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.
BOSWELL What truth?
JOHNSON Nay, sir, I have yet to test it. Come with me.

In the passage-way Annet lay still under the reddened blankets. Grisley and his maid sat as still on the settle, he with his face in his hands, she at his shoulder regarding him with a countenance full of concern. A blackened old chair with high back stood opposite. Dr. Johnson ensconced himself therein like some judge on the bench, and I took my stand by him like a bailiff.

"Mistress Oliver," he began, "pray assist our deliberations."

"As best I can, sir," she answered readily.

Grisley did not stir.

"Then tell us, in your airy peregrination, in what condition did you find Mrs. Duncom's casement window?"

"Bolted fast, sir, I was forced to break the glass that I might reach in and turn the catch."

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"I know, we heard it shatter. You broke the glass and reached in. With both hands?"

"Certainly not, sir, I held on with the other hand."

"Then why did you break two panes?"

"I don't know. For greater assurance—"

"Nonsense! I put it to you, my girl, *you found the window broken.*"

"Then why would I break it again?"

"Because you knew at once who had been there before you, and thought only to shield him. So you broke the second pane, that we might hear the crash of glass, and think you had been forced to break in. The broken window would else tell us that the murderer came from Mr. Grisley's casement."

"He never!" cried the woman, on her feet before her master as if to shield him. "Would he kill Annet, that he lusted after?"

"Would he not, if she resisted him? These violent passions have violent ends. No, no. I pity him, but justice must be done. Think, Mistress Oliver, this is the man that slunk around the parapet at dead of night, a hammer in his pocket. With it he breaks a pane, turns the bolt, and enters. The two helpless old women fall victim to his string, lest they hinder his intent. When Annet resists him, in his fury he batters her to death, and so flees as he came. May such a creature live?"

This harangue slowly penetrated the mind of the unhappy Grisley, and he rose to his feet.

"Bucket!" called Dr. Johnson sharply. The watchman appeared. "Take him in!"

"No! No!" cried the woman. "He is innocent!"

"Who will believe it?" countered Johnson. "No, ma'am, he'll hang for it, and justly too. Did you ever see a man hanged, Mr. Boswell? It is a shocking sight to see a man struggling as he strangles in a string, his face suffused, his limbs convulsed, for long horrible minutes. Well, he has earned it. Take him, Bucket."

As Bucket collared the unresisting Grisley, we found we had a fury on our hands. With nails and teeth Kat Oliver fell upon Dr. Johnson. I had her off in a trice; but I could not have held her had not Bucket come to my aid.

"I thank you, Mr. Boswell," said Dr. Johnson, settling his neckcloth and staunching his cheek, "your address has saved me a mauling. A woman's a lioness in defence of what she loves."

"In my belief she's mad," said I angrily, as the wiry little woman wrenched against our pinioning arms.

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"That may also be true. A thin line divides great love and madness. Give over, ma'am, let justice take its course. So, that's better—let her go, Mr. Boswell. As to Mr. Grisley, Bucket, to Newgate with him, and lock him in the condemned cell."

"You shan't! You shan't!" sobbed Kat Oliver wildly. "It was I that killed them, it was I, it was I!"

"You, ma'am? A likely story! Why would you do such a thing?"

"Why would I destroy that prim little bitch, that was destroying him? For his sake, gladly. Yet I never meant to use the hammer, that I carried only to break the glass—"

"But," I objected, "Biddy had the hammer!"

"You are deceived, Mr. Boswell. To disclaim the hammer, this woman did not scruple to lie. Well, then, Mrs. Oliver, if not to use the hammer, what was your intent?"

The little woman's eyes looked inward, and she spoke with a kind of horrid relish:

"When I knew the people lay bound and gagged—"

"How did you know?"

"I heard the talk on the landing. I could not sleep for thinking of—I could not sleep, and the boys were drunk and loud. I opened the door and listened. I saw my opportunity. How I entered you know. The old women I finished neatly, with their own curtain cords. The young one—"

"Yes, the young one?"

"The young one I reserved for a more dreadful fate. It was I who shot the front-door bolt, intending to leave her locked in with murder, and see her hanged for it."

"Who could think she did it, when she lay bound?" I demanded.

"Of course I did away with the bonds," said the woman contemptuously.

"Yet you killed her, how was that to your purpose?"

"I meant only to stun her, but she got loose and fought me. I saw red. I killed her. Then I returned as I came."

"And when the people became alarmed and would break in," Dr. Johnson supplied, "you saw it must be you, and no one else, to break the window and effect an entrance there, lest the broken window be observed by others, pointing directly at the folk from Mr. Grisley's."

She made no answer, but turned to her master.

"I did it for you, Edward."

With a blind gesture, Grisley turned away.

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"All for nothing, then."

Dining together the next day at the Mitre, we naturally turned our talk to the exciting hours we had spent in Bayfield Court the day before.

BOSWELL Were you not surprised, sir, when Katty Oliver confessed her guilt?

JOHNSON Not at all, sir, I knew it all along. What did she care if the door was battered in? Only the strongest of motives would suffice to set her on that precarious circuit she traversed. She must have known what would be found at the end of it. Nay, more, how did she know it was an easy way around the parapet, if she had not traversed it before?

BOSWELL Yet how eloquently you depicted the unhappy Grisley's crime and his imminent fate.

JOHNSON Thus I put her to the torture, for I could see how much he meant to her; and when I turned the screw with talk of the horrors of hanging, she confessed to save him, as I foresaw she would.

BOSWELL What will become of her? Surely she'll hang?

JOHNSON In the ordinary course, sir, yes. But I had the curiosity to inquire this morning, and by what I learn, she will not hang. It appears that, as Aunt Moll said, she was ever subject to fits, no doubt she committed her terrible crimes in an unnatural phrenzy. Well, sir, when she saw the cells last night she fell into a dead catalepsy and was carried insensible to Bedlam, where 'tis clear she belongs.

BOSWELL And Biddy, what of her?

JOHNSON The Sander brothers, that delivered over the old women bound to be murdered, have made good their escape, leaving Biddy to pay for their crime.

BOSWELL This seems unfair, sir.

JOHNSON Why, sir, receiving of stolen goods is a hanging offence, Miss Biddy cannot complain. But the Temple watchmen are not incorruptible, and the Temple watch-house is not impregnable. Moreover, Mr. Geegan, the son of an Irish Peer, has well-lined pockets. In short, sir, he has spirited away Miss Biddy, who knows whither. And so ends the affair of murder lock'd in.

BOSWELL (boldly) Which I hope I may one day narrate at large when, as I mean to do, I record for posterity the exploits of *Sam: Johnson, detector!*

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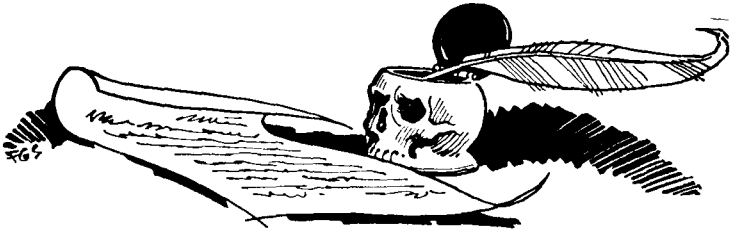
AUTHOR'S COMMENT

The hardest thing about writing this story was making it probable. I suppose this is because it actually happened. Real events don't necessarily bother about probability.

It happened, and I tell it as it happened, except of course for the intervention of Dr. Sam: Johnson. The solution is my own. In actual fact the Irish girl was hanged, which seems hard for only keeping watch and accepting a silver tankard; but such was justice in those inhuman days.

In analyzing the "locked-room mystery" and its possible solutions, with singular prescience, Dr. Johnson seems to have anticipated John Dickson Carr's "locked-room lecture" in THE THREE COFFINS; though the solution that detector Sam: Johnson arrives at is not among those considered by Carr.

The classic "string trick" for bolting a door from outside, here explained by the watchman, was actually demonstrated at the Irish girl's trial, when they brought the door into open court and performed the trick upon it to the amazement of all beholders. You may read all about it in George Borrow's CELEBRATED TRIALS, II, 536-571.



NEXT MONTH...

14 ***NEW*** stories—including

RUTH RENDELL (about the green road)

ISAAC ASIMOV (about the Black Widowers)

HUGH PENTECOST (about Pierre Chambrun)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Captain Leopold)

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Marilyn Pribus' first story, "The Calendar Chest," appeared in the June 1979 issue of EQMM. It was well received. The author now tells us that her second story, like her first, "had its beginnings in a dream." And there are dreams in this subtle story too (dreams? nightmares?) and a dreamlike quality to the strange events that may at times elude your grasp. It is difficult most times to grasp a dream—as it is difficult most times to grasp a reality . . .

OCCUPANT BOX 253

by MARILYN PRIBUS

I heard the train when I awoke but I knew it wasn't the train that had awakened me—it was my bewildering dream again. I lay motionless, willing myself to resubmerge into the dream, but the heavy clatter of the train's wheels dragged me farther and farther from it and finally, as the racket trickled into the distance, I was wide-awake.

I tried to visualize the dream fragment that remained. I was facing a huge wall-display comprised of a myriad of glittering doors, row after row of them. So many nights before I'd had the same obscure, vaguely frightening dream. I'd awaken with a terrible feeling of something lost—a baffling impression of something I had to do, something I had to find, a game I had to play without knowing the rules. I had a dreadful sense of having known the rules once, only to have forgotten them when they'd become essential.

After several weeks I'd put a scratch pad by the bed, scribbling down notes during the night. In the morning I'd read my cryptic jottings. Usually it was a mysterious and totally unremembered message such as *little doors* or *Automat?* or *control panel.*

What were those doors? I asked myself as I sipped instant coffee

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in the kitchenette of my furnished apartment. I thought about them as I massaged my feet on my afternoon break, weary from forced patience with people who made selecting just the right tie a Major Decision. (I'd worked in the Men's Accessories Department for almost six months.) Doors, doors, little doors, I mused as I punched the time clock and hurried to the post office before it closed. I had to mail (what else?) a tie to Uncle Bert for his birthday.

There was a long line. Sighing resignedly I walked to the end and stood, letting my head roll slightly from side to side, trying to relax my aching neck and shoulders. Selling ties is not only boring, it's tiring. My eyes closed briefly and as they opened I saw the doors. For a moment I thought I was asleep and dreaming, but no—there they were.

I stared at the ranks of post-office boxes. Like getting the answer on an exam after struggling for a long time and having the absolute conviction the answer is right, I *knew* that's what my dreams were about. Beyond any doubt I knew these were the little doors of my dreams, but I was as perplexed as ever. I still had that faltering feeling of not doing something I needed to do. I had a pervasive sensation of being a broken radio unable to catch a signal from the air. If I just did *something* I'd be able to receive it.

The next morning I awoke late after a dreamless night—the first in a long time. I took a hasty shower, fixed my coffee, carried it into the bedroom, then made the bed. As I tucked the spread under the pillow my gaze fell on my note pad. The number 253 was written there in a bold hand. It had to be my writing although it seemed unfamiliar. What could it mean? It must have been another dream I didn't remember at all.

I snatched the sheet from the pad and crumpled it. Wadding it tightly into a small sphere I pressed the pedal of my garbage container, dropped in the paper, and let the top fall with a conclusive clang.

But I could not dismiss the mental picture of that scrap of paper. Dangling from a strap on the bus I read the newspaper of the man next to me as we swayed in rhythm to the bus's motion. Just below the headlines was a picture of a man running, evidently winning a race of some sort. His shirt number was 253.

The first customer of the day paid by check. As I copied down her phone number on the order form, the first three digits were 253.

Feeling vaguely haunted, I took my afternoon break in the employees' lounge, resting and listening to the piped-in music of a local

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radio station. "And as we move along to music by Peter Nero," murmured a female voice, "the time is 2:53."

Washing over me like a sudden fog was, not exactly a malevolence, but an oppressive pressure. I leaned back and closed my eyes, trying to empty my mind. I stayed motionless for several minutes and then suddenly I had the same I've-got-it feeling I'd had at the post office when I recognized the little doors. I knew what I had to do.

"Do you have any boxes for rent?" I asked the man behind the post-office counter.

"Yes, we do," he said. "You know, you're in luck. It's funny, we usually have a waiting list, but there's just this one box. If you want it, you better take it right now."

"What's the number?" I asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"253," he said. "Does it make a difference?"

"Oh, no," I said. "No, that's fine. I'll take it."

Every day I peered into the box. For three days it was empty, but on the fourth day there was something. I whirled the combination and took out an envelope addressed to OCCUPANT BOX 253. What a letdown. I didn't know what I'd expected, but a fleeting picture crossed my mind about the size of a true occupant of a post-office box.

Then my initial disappointment faded, for as I examined the envelope I could see that despite the impersonal addressee, it wasn't bulk mail. It was addressed by hand in a stylish writing that was attractive to view but difficult to read. Inside was a small piece of paper bearing these words:

Will you help me?
Will you find me?
Will you meet me?
Where am I?

I stared at the strange message. It made no sense to me. I inspected the envelope, but there was no return address and the postmark was local, mailed the previous day.

"Excuse me," said a voice behind me and from its tone I knew it wasn't the first time the words had been spoken. I whispered an apology and moved away from the boxes, frowning at the slip of paper.

In the following week I received several more envelopes addressed to OCCUPANT. One offered me cut-rate aluminum siding, one invited me to a grand opening of a pancake house, and another boasted

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of special prices for men's three-piece suits available only to Preferred Customers.

Then exactly one week later there was another hand-addressed envelope. Dear Occupant. With an effort I deciphered the same stylish, nearly illegible scrawl.

I'm watching a twenty-year clock.
I'm rowing with no oarlock.
I'm searching for the doorlock.
Where am I?

A doorlock? I thought puzzling. I decided about the only other word that rhymed with oarlock was warlock and although the whole thing seemed unreal, I wasn't worried about witches.

The "Where am I?" of the messages concerned me less than the Who. It seemed a complicated effort for a practical joke, and in truth I couldn't think of anyone I knew well enough in the city to go to all that trouble. Besides, it wasn't funny at all. Quite the opposite: it was weird, uncanny, disturbing. I was certain I would have recognized that hand if I'd seen it before, but the writing was totally unfamiliar.

The third message came a week after the second—an uneasy week for me.

I'm seeking the other.
Never was a brother.
Ask the mother.
Where am I?

"Mother?" I said on the phone that night after she'd run through the roster of the Springfield relatives and the states of their health. "Mom, I've got a question you may think is funny, but did I have a sister before you and Dad adopted me?"

There was a stark silence.

"Mother?"

She sighed. "Why do you ask that?"

"I can't really explain," I said. "I did have one, didn't I?"

"Yes, you're right. Perhaps I should have told you, but . . . well, there didn't seem to be any point. I hadn't even thought about it in years until you mentioned it. You were actually a twin. Your twin was even tinier than you and they, the doctors, weren't sure she would make it."

"Did she?"

"Make it? I don't know, lamb, I really don't. Why are you asking now?"

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"Oh, no reason. Just a—a dream I had the other night."

The entrance was nearly ten feet high—formidable double doors, and although they opened easily, it was like entering a fortress. The building lacked only a moat. An aggressive attempt at charm suffused the halls and dayrooms, yet it was damply oppressive like an unheated greenhouse.

I followed signs along the corridors and through several heavy white-metal doors until I reached Dogwood Wing. On its door was an amateurishly painted sign with white blossoms overwhelming a small tree.

I started to press the buzzer under the sign reading *RING FOR ADMITTANCE*, then hesitated and walked to the window opposite the door. I was on the third floor and stared out for several minutes gathering my fading determination around me like a cloak. I watched a red station wagon maneuver into a small parking spot. I watched a woman dressed in white leading an elderly man in a direction he plainly didn't want to go. I watched a flock of beady birds bank and flow together across the air to land in perfect unison on the top of a leafless tree just outside the window.

As I watched without seeing, I remembered the long letter from my mother. She had found out that although my twin had survived she had never been adopted, and mother was able to trace my sister's whereabouts. And her whereabouts were right here in the city—right here in this hospital, in Dogwood Wing.

Finally I walked to the door. The nurse who answered the buzzer's summons greeted me with amazement. "My word!" she said, her keys jangling as she withdrew them from the lock and let them automatically reel back on their chain into a holder at her waist. "I'm sure I don't have to ask whom you've come to see. You have to be her sister—you look just like her." She gestured down the hall. "Room 12, she's in. Third door on your left."

Have you ever suddenly come around a corner and been startled to see someone coming toward you and then abruptly realized you're facing a mirror and only seeing your own reflection? It was like that, only backward. I came slowly into the doorway and found I was looking into a mirror, except it wasn't. It was my sister and seeing her was absolutely indescribable. I was looking at my reflection and finding that I'd lost a bit of weight and let my hair grow longer, but it was still me.

I shivered involuntarily and vaguely remembered my grand-

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mother saying something about a goose walking over her grave. It didn't make sense, but then none of this did.

"Hello," I managed to say, wondering dazedly if I should hug her or offer to shake hands.

"Hello," she said softly, retreating into the room until her back was against the curtains. She looked at me slightly sideways, not fully meeting my eyes, and bit her lip. She motioned to a chair with her head. "Won't you sit down?" she asked formally.

I sat down and glanced around the room. The furnishings were sparse—only two straight chairs, a hospital bed, and a dresser with two rows of drawers. There was a doorless closet and the window had a decorative grille. An unexpectedly bright floral curtain hid the bars partially, but the prison atmosphere persisted. There were small congregations of dust in the corners of the room.

The silence lasted much too long. "I don't really know what to say," I said.

"I knew you'd come," she replied with absolute conviction.

"That's more than I knew," I said. "I never knew about you."

"You knew," she said intensely. "You just didn't know you knew. I always knew about you. I don't know how, but I always did. I didn't know where you were, but I *knew*. There had to be another part of me somewhere. When I turned eighteen and got all my papers and saw my birth certificate, it answered a lot of questions. It said I was the firstborn of twins and I knew you were more than an imaginary playmate I'd invented."

I shook my head in confusion. "I don't understand it at all," I said. "I had strange dreams and then a—a—compulsion to rent a post-office box."

"That's right," she said with utter finality.

She sat down on the other chair with an air of being prepared to flee. Without being exactly evasive she nevertheless eluded my careful questions. We ended up discussing, politely, TV shows, hospital food, the weather, and my job in men's ties and cufflinks. It was all a trifle strained. There was so much I wanted to ask but didn't dare. After half an hour I said I should go. She walked with me to the ward door. "Will you come again?" she asked tightly.

"Yes, of course," I assured her. "I'll come if you want me to."

After several visits we were more comfortable with each other and soon I was visiting her almost every day. We played gin rummy and talked more and more between hands. She'd riffle the cards

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briskly, arching them neatly into a deck, then deal them out with decisive snaps, rather at odds with her shy conversation.

As we played she told me about the foster home where she'd been kept from school to baby-sit younger children. I told her about the apple tree in the side yard and the baseball diamond in the park and how we'd play hide and seek in the twilight. She talked about two years with another family where she'd been terrorized by a surly teenaged son. I mentioned Charlie finding someone else a month before we were supposed to be married.

She was reluctant to discuss her past and preferred to hear about mine. What had my bedroom been like? Who had been my best friends when I was little? Did I play the piano? Who were my favorite relatives? I told her about the big Fourth of July picnic and Christmas at Grandma's.

"I feel so bad telling you about all this," I told her one day. "It's all so unfair."

"No, no," she said. "Don't feel bad. I love hearing about everything. It's almost as if your mother was my mother—your adopted mother, I mean."

Yet, despite her protests, I felt guilty. What had she done to deserve all the unhappiness? For that matter, what had *I* done to deserve all the good things in my life? We'd been born in the same place at the same time with all the same genes. Where was the justice of it all? Rationally I knew it wasn't my fault, but guilt sat on my head like a heavy hat.

When I'd voice these disturbing feelings to her she'd reassure me. "Really, it's okay," she'd tell me. "I feel a lot better now I've got you. I really mean it. It will all be fine. Everybody has their turn."

"How did it work? The post-office thing?" I asked her one day. She'd just knocked with only 2 points catching me with 53 in my hand and she seemed more relaxed than usual.

"Concentration," she said cryptically, gathering the cards.

"Come on."

"ESP," she said, nodding seriously. I looked at her and raised my eyebrow in doubt. She'd got her hair cut short like mine and had lost her pinched, worried look.

"I don't get it," I said. "Sorry if I'm slow."

"You're not slow," she said, tapping the cards on the table to straighten them. "You just aren't tuned in, that's all. It took a long time, but you finally got my message. ESP is real, you know. The astronauts did ESP experiments when they went to the moon and

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the Russians have been experimenting for years. Twins are supposed to be the best subjects of all. We're the embodiment of the split personality."

"So you're saying you *made* me dream those dreams?"

"I don't know," she said. "All I'm saying is that I was sending a message for you to rent that box and you received it. You see, I just knew *about* you. I didn't know your adopted name or even if you lived nearby. I've been sending messages for years, but it was only the last few months I felt a little something coming back—like radar echoes, sort of. That's when I started on the post-office box."

"It's really weird. I don't believe in that sort of thing, but here I am."

"Here you are," she agreed in a satisfied tone, dealing out the hands.

"Why are *you* here?" I asked her another time.

"They say I'm schizophrenic," she replied flatly. She turned stonily to the window and for the rest of the evening the cards sat ignored on the table and I sat ignored in my chair. The very next day, however, she was friendly and talkative, full of questions. She was taking up numerology, she declared. What was my social-security number? My checking-account number? My apartment number? My phone number?

I felt vaguely uncomfortable about her inquisitiveness and made a joking reference to the Privacy Act, but then I scolded myself. She had had so little and now here she was, confined in this ward with the silent, scowling people I'd seen in the halls. I could go up to the big white door at the end of the corridor and walk right through it, but the door slammed in her face.

One day about two weeks later I wore a new skirt and blouse I'd bought on sale. Nothing fancy, but it was a pretty blouse, and with my store discount it was reasonably priced.

"Oh, I love your outfit," she said when I walked in. "Can I try it on?"

I was stricken. Why hadn't I bought something for her? There'd been an identical blouse and I thought there'd been a skirt, too. There would certainly have been no problem in getting the right size. She'd gained a little weight and when she'd prodded me onto the scales the day before we were both 117½.

I didn't really want to undress, but how could I say no. I smiled through my guilty conscience and slipped out of the skirt and blouse. She put them on and glanced in the mirror over the chest.

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"Listen, I want to see the whole thing," she said. "I'm going down the hall to the full-length mirror, okay?" I forced a smile and nodded. "You know what I'm going to do?" she said, going out the door. "I'm going to see if the nurse thinks I'm you."

"And that was the last you saw of her?" the doctor asked.

"That was the last I saw of her," she replied. "It took me a few minutes to realize she wasn't coming back, and then I wasn't dressed, you see. She'd somehow taken my purse, too. I put on some of her clothes from the closet, but she was already gone."

"After we talked yesterday I took the liberty of calling your sister," the doctor said. "She informed me that you had had some sort of argument, that you had become extremely agitated, and that was why she had not returned."

"Well, of course she'd say that. We didn't have any argument. She just substituted herself for me. She'd wanted to know all about my past history and where I worked and even how to make out the charge slips at the store. She wanted to know about my phone bill and where to punch in on the time clock." Her voice became shriller and higher. "She wanted to know everything about me. She wanted to become me. She *did* become me. She *stole* me." Anxious tears sprang to her eyes. "Can't you tell I'm not her? Can't you see I'm me?"

"Calm yourself, my dear," the doctor said soothingly.

The woman became quiet. Her shoulders sagged. She studied her hands in her lap, then looked up at the doctor with a half smile. She shook her head disbelievingly, rose, and trudged with the attendant back to Dogwood Wing.

Later she walked down the hall to the dayroom, sat down at the desk, and placed an envelope precisely on the center of the blotter, measuring the distance carefully with her fingers. She picked up a pencil and held it vertically in front of her. "It's really stupid I didn't see it coming," she told the pencil earnestly. "All the questions and information and changing clothes like that. How could I have forgotten? It's the same way I got *her* in and *me* out last spring. I can't *imagine* how I forgot . . ."

She set the pencil down exactly parallel to the bottom of the envelope and stared at them for several minutes. Then she took a deep breath, picked up the pencil, and in a stylish handwriting that was attractive to view but difficult to read, she started to write: OCCUPANT BOX 253

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a ***NEW*** short story by

STEPHEN KING

The story of a Dixieland jazz band in 1927—"when jazz was jazz, not noise"—and of the special gig it played at the wedding reception of the fat bride . . . ragtime and goons and molls and the Roaring Twenties . . .

Stephen King is the author of CARRIE *and* THE DEAD ZONE. *The latter is the story of Johnny Smith, who "can see the future and no one wants to listen"; the book, at the time of this writing, has been on the Best Sellers list of "The New York Times Book Review" for more than 30 weeks . . .*

THE WEDDING GIG

by STEPHEN KING

In the year 1927 we were playing jazz in a speakeasy just south of Morgan, Illinois, which is 70 miles from Chicago. It was real hick country, not another big town for 20 miles in any direction. But there were a lot of plowboys with a hankering for something stronger than Moxie after a hot day in the field, and a lot of young bucks out duding it up with their drugstore buddies. There were also some married men (you know them, friend, they might as well be wearing signs) coming far out of their way to be where no one would recognize them while they cut a rug with their not-quite-legit lassies.

That was when jazz was jazz, not noise. We had a five-man combination—drums, clarinet, trombone, piano, and trumpet—and we were pretty good. That was still three years before we made our first records and four years before talkies.

We were playing *Bamboo Bay* when this big fellow walked in,

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wearing a white suit and smoking a pipe with more squiggles in it than a French horn. The whole band was a little drunk but the crowd was positively blind and everyone was having a high old time. There hadn't been a single fight all night. All of us were sweating rivers and Tommy Englander, the guy who ran the place, kept sending up rye. Englander was a good fellow to work for, and he liked our sound.

The guy in the white suit sat down at the bar and I forgot him. We finished up the set with *Aunt Hagar's Blues*, which was what passed for racy out in the boondocks back then, and got a good round of applause. Manny had a big grin on his face as he put his horn down, and I clapped him on the back as we left the bandstand. There was a lonely-looking girl in a green evening dress that had been giving me the eye all night. She was a redhead, and I've always been partial to those. I got a signal from her eyes and the tilt of her head, so I started threading my way through the crowd to get to her.

Halfway there the man in the white suit stepped in front of me. Up close he looked tough, with bristly back hair and the flat, oddly shiny eyes that some deepsea fish have. There was something familiar about him.

"Want to talk to you outside," he said.

The redhead was looking away. She seemed disappointed.

"It can wait," I said. "Let me by."

"My name is Scollay. Mike Scollay."

I knew the name. Mike Scollay was a small-time racketeer from Chicago who made his money running booze in from Canada. His picture had been in the paper a few times. The last time had been when another little Caesar tried to gun him down.

"You're pretty far from Chicago," I said.

"I brought some friends. Let's go outside."

The redhead looked over and I pointed to Scollay and shrugged. She sniffed and turned her back.

"You queered that," I said.

"Bimbos like that are a penny the bushel in Chi," he said. "Outside."

We went out. The air was cool on my skin after the smoky close atmosphere of the club, sweet with fresh-cut alfalfa grass. The stars were out, soft and flickering. The hoods were out too, but they didn't look a bit soft, and the only things flickering on them were their cigarettes.

"I've got some money for you," Scollay said.

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"I haven't done anything for you."

"You're going to. It's two C's. Split it up with the band or hold back a hundred for yourself."

"What is it?"

"A gig," he said. "My sis is getting married. I want you to play for the reception. She likes Dixieland. Two of my boys say you play good Dixieland."

I told you Englander was good to work for. He was paying eighty a week split five ways, four hours a night. This guy was offering well over twice that for one gig.

"It's from five to eight, next Friday," Scollay said. "At the Grover Street Hall in Chi."

"It's too much," I said. "How come?"

"There's two reasons," Scollay said. He puffed on his pipe. It looked out of place in that yegg's face. He should have had a Lucky dangling from his mouth, or a Sweet Caporal. The pipe made him look sad and funny.

"First," he said, "maybe you heard the Greek tried to rub me out."

"I saw your picture in the paper," I said. "You were the guy trying to crawl into the sidewalk."

"Smart guy," he growled, but with no real force. "I'm getting too big for him. The Greek is getting old and he still thinks small. He ought to be back in the old country, drinking olive oil and looking at the Pacific."

"It's the Aegean," I said.

"An ocean's an ocean," he said. "Anyway, the Greek is still out to get me."

"In other words, you're paying two hundred because our last number might be arranged for Enfield rifle accompaniment."

Anger flashed on his face, and something else—sorrow? "I got the best protection money can buy. If anyone funny sticks his nose in, he won't get a chance to sniff twice."

"What's the other thing?"

Softly he said, "My sister's marrying an Italian."

"A good Catholic like you," I sneered softly.

The anger flashed again, white-hot, and I thought I'd pushed it too far. "A good *mick*! I'm a good mick, sonny, and you better not forget it!" To that he added, almost too low to be heard, "Even if I did lose most of my hair, it was red."

I started to say something, but he didn't give me the chance. He swung me around and pressed his face down until our noses almost

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touched. I never saw such anger and humiliation and rage and determination in a man's face. You never see that on a white face these days, the love-hate pressure of a man's race. But it was there then, and I saw it that night.

"She's fat," he breathed. "A lot of people have been laughing at me when my back is turned. They don't do it when I can see them, though. I'll tell you that, Mr. Cornet Player. Because maybe this little twerp was all she could get. But you're not gonna laugh at her and nobody else is either because you're gonna play too loud. No one is going to laugh at my sis."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know why he told me or even why he thought a Dixieland band was his answer, but I didn't want to argue with him. You wouldn't have wanted to, either, funny clothes and pipe or not.

"We don't laugh at people when we play our gigs," I said. "Makes it too hard to pucker."

That relieved the tension. He laughed a short barking laugh. "You be there at five, ready to play. Grover Street Hall. I'll pay your expenses both ways."

I felt railroaded into the decision, but it was too late now. Scollay was already striding away, and one of his paid companions was holding open the back door of a Packard coupe.

They drove away. I stayed out a while longer and had a smoke. The evening was soft and fine and Scollay seemed more and more like something I might have dreamed. I was just wishing we could bring the bandstand out to the parking lot and play when Biff tapped me on the shoulder.

"Time," he said.

"Okay."

We went back in. The redhead had picked up some salt-and-pepper sailor who looked twice her age. I don't know what a member of the U.S. Navy was doing in central Illinois, but as far as I was concerned, he could have her if her taste was that bad.

I didn't feel so hot. The rye had gone to my head, and Scollay seemed a lot more real in here, where the fumes of what his kind sold were strong enough to float on.

"We had a request for *Camptown Races*," Charlie said.

"Forget it," I said curtly. "None of that now."

I could see Billy-Boy stiffen just as he was sitting down to the piano, and then his face was smooth again. I could have kicked myself around the block.

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"I'm sorry, Billy," I told him. "I haven't been myself tonight."

"Sure," he said, but there was no big smile and I knew he felt bad. He knew what I had started to say.

I told them about the gig during our next break, being square with them about the money and how Scollay was a hood (although I didn't tell them there was another hood out to get him). I also told them that Scollay's sister was fat but nobody was to even crack a smile about it. I told them Scollay was sensitive.

It seemed to me that Billy-Boy Williams flinched again at that, but you couldn't tell it from his face. It would be easier to tell what a walnut was thinking by reading the wrinkles on the shell. Billy-Boy was the best ragtime piano player we ever had and we were all sorry about the little ways it got taken out on him as we traveled from one place to another—the Jim Crow car south of the Mason-Dixon line, the balcony at the movies, the different hotel room in some towns—but what could I do? In those days you lived with those differences.

We turned up at Grover Street on Friday at four o'clock just to make sure we'd have plenty of time to set up. We drove up from Morgan in a special Ford truck that Biff and Manny and I had put together. The back end was all enclosed, and there were two cots bolted to the floor. We even had an electric hotplate that ran off the battery, and the band's name was painted on the outside.

The day was just right—a ham-and-egg summer day if you ever saw one, with little white angel clouds floating over the fields. But it was hot and gritty in Chicago, full of the hustle and bustle you could get out of touch with in a place like Morgan. When we got there my clothes were sticking to my body and I needed to visit the comfort station. I could have used a shot of Tommy Englander's rye, too.

The hall was a big wooden building, sort of affiliated with the church where Scollay's sis was getting married, I guess. You know the kind of joint I mean—Ladies' Robert Browning Society on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Bingo on Wednesdays, and a sociable for the kids on Friday or Saturday night.

We trooped up the walk, each of us carrying his instrument in one hand and some part of Biff's drum-kit in the other. A thin lady with no breastworks to speak of was directing traffic inside. Two sweating men were hanging crepe paper. There was a bandstand at

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the front of the hall, and over it was a pair of pink-paper wedding bells and some tinsel lettering which said *BEST ALWAYS MAUREEN AND RICO.*

Maureen and Rico. Damned if I couldn't see why Scollay was so upset. Maureen and Rico. Now wasn't that a combination!

The thin lady saw us and swooped down to our end of the hall. She looked like she had a lot to say, so I beat her to the punch. "We're the band," I said.

"The band?" She blinked at our instruments distrustfully. "Oh. I was hoping you were the caterers."

I smiled as if caterers always carried snare drums and trombone cases.

"You can—" she began, but just then a tough-looking boy of about 19 strolled over. A cigarette was dangling from the left corner of his mouth, but so far as I could see, it wasn't doing a thing for his image except making his left eye water.

"Open that stuff up," he said.

Charlie and Biff looked at me and I just shrugged. We opened our cases and he looked at the horns. Seeing nothing that looked lethal, he wandered back to his corner and sat down on a folding chair.

"You can set your things up right away," she went on, as if there had been no interruption. "There's a piano in the other room. I'll have my men wheel it in when we're done putting up our decorations."

Biff was already lugging his drum-kit up onto the little stage.

"I though you were the caterers," she said to me in a distraught way. "Mr. Scollay ordered a wedding cake and there are hors d'oeuvres and roasts of beef and—"

"They'll be here, ma'am," I said. "They get payment on delivery."

"—capons and roasts of pork and Mr. Scollay will be furious if—" She saw one of her men pausing to light a cigarette just below a dangling streamer and screamed, "*HENRY!*" The man jumped as if he had been shot, and I escaped to the bandstand.

We were all set up by a quarter to five. Charlie, the trombone player, was wah-wahing away into a mute and Biff was loosening up his wrists. The caterers had arrived at 4:20 and Miss Gibson (that was her name; she made a business out of such affairs) almost threw herself on them.

Four long tables had been set up and covered with white linen, and four black women in caps and aprons were setting places. The

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cake had been wheeled into the middle of the room for everyone to gasp over. It was six layers high, with a little bride and groom on top.

I walked outside to have a smoke and just about halfway through it I heard them coming, tooting away and making a general racket. When I saw the lead vehicle coming around the corner of the block below the church, I snubbed my smoke and went back inside.

"They're coming," I told Miss Gibson.

She went white as a sheet. That lady should have picked a different profession. "The tomato juice!" she screamed. "Bring in the tomato juice!"

I went back up to the bandstand and we got ready. We had played quite a few gigs like this before—what band hasn't?—and when the doors opened, we swung into a ragtime version of *The Wedding March* that I had arranged myself. Most receptions we played for loved it.

Everybody clapped and yelled and then started gassing among themselves, but I could tell by the way some of them were tapping their feet that we were getting through. We were on—it was going to be a good gig.

But I have to admit that I almost blew the whole number when the groom and the blushing bride walked in. Scollay, dressed in a morning-coat and a ruffled shirt and striped trousers, shot me a hard look, and don't think I didn't see it. The rest of the band kept a poker face too, and we didn't miss a note. Lucky for us. The wedding party, which looked as if it were made up almost entirely of Scollay's goons and their molls, were wise already. They had to be, if they'd been at the church. But I'd only heard faint rumblings, you might say.

You've heard about Jack Sprat and his wife. Well, this was a hundred times worse. Scollay's sister had the red hair he was losing, and it was long and curly. But not that pretty auburn shade you may be imagining. It was as bright as a carrot and as kinky as a bedspring. She looked just awful. And had Scollay said she was fat? Brother, that was like saying you can buy a few things in Macy's. The woman was a dinosaur—350 if she was a pound. It had all gone to her bosom and hips and thighs like it does on fat girls, making her flesh grotesque and frightening. Some fat girls have pathetically pretty faces, but Scollay's sis didn't even have that. Her eyes were too close together, her mouth was too big, and her ears stuck out. Even thin, she'd have been as ugly as the serpent in the garden.

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That alone wouldn't have made anybody laugh, unless they were stupid or just poison-mean. It was when you added the groom, Rico, to the combination that you wanted to laugh until you cried.

He could have put on a top hat and stood in the top half of her shadow. He was about five three and must have weighed all of 90 pounds soaking wet. He was skinny as a rail, and his complexion was darkly olive. When he grinned around nervously, his teeth looked like a picket fence in a slum neighborhood.

We just kept right on playing.

Scollay roared, "The bride and the groom! May they always be happy!"

Everyone shouted their approval and applauded. We finished our number with a flourish, and that brought another round. Scollay's sister Maureen smiled nervously. Rico simpered.

For a while everyone just walked around, eating cheese and cold cuts on crackers and drinking Scollay's best bootleg Scotch. I had three shots myself between numbers, and it was pretty smooth.

Scollay began to look a little happier, too—I imagine he was sampling his own wares pretty freely.

He dropped by the bandstand once and said, "You guys play pretty good." Coming from a music lover like him, I reckoned that was a real compliment.

Just before everyone sat down to the meal, Maureen came up herself. She was even uglier up close, and her white gown (there must have been enough white satin to cover three beds) didn't help her at all. She asked us if we could play *Roses of Picardy* like Red Nichols and His Five Pennies, because it was her very favorite song. Fat and ugly or not, she was very sweet about it, not a bit hoity-toity like some of the two-bitters that had been dropping by. We played it, but not very well. Still, she gave us a sweet smile that was almost enough to make her pretty, and she applauded when it was done.

They sat down to the meal around 6:15, and Miss Gibson's hired help rolled in the chow. They fell to it like a bunch of animals, which was not entirely surprising, and kept drinking it up all the time. I couldn't help noticing the way Maureen was eating, though. She made the rest of them look like old ladies in a roadside tearoom. She had no more time for sweet smiles or listening to *Roses of Picardy*. That lady didn't need a knife and a fork. She needed a steam shovel. It was sad to watch her. And Rico (you could just see his chin over the edge of the table where the bride's party was

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sitting) just kept handing her things, never changing that nervous simper.

We took a twenty-minute break while the cake-cutting ceremony was going on and Miss Gibson herself fed us out in the back part of the hall. It was hot as blazes with the cook stove on, and none of us was too hungry. Manny and Biff had brought some pastry boxes though, and were stuffing in slabs of roast beef and roast pork every time Miss Gibson turned her back.

By the time we returned to the bandstand, the drinking had begun in earnest. Tough-looking guys staggered around with silly grins on their mugs or stood in corners haggling over racing forms. Some couples wanted to Charleston, so we played *Aunt Hagar's Blues* (those goons ate it up) and *I'm Gonna Charleston Back to Charleston* and some other jazzy numbers like that. The molls rocked around the floor, flashing their rolled hose and sounding as shrill as macaws. It was almost completely dark outside, and millers and moths had come in through the open windows and were flitting around the light fixtures. And as the song says, the band played on. The bride and groom stood on the sidelines—neither of them seemed interested in slipping away early—almost completely neglected. Even Scollay seemed to have forgotten them. He was pretty drunk.

It was almost 8:00 when the little fellow crept in. I spotted him immediately because he was sober and dressed better than the rest of them. And he looked scared. He looked like a near-sighted cat in a dog pound. He walked up to Scollay, who was talking with some floozie right by the bandstand, and tapped him on the shoulder. Scollay wheeled around, and I heard every word they said.

"Who the hell are you?" Scollay asked rudely.

"My name is Katzenos," the fellow said, and his eyes rolled whitely. "I come from the Greek."

Motion on the floor came to a dead stop. We kept on playing though, you bet. Jacket buttons were freed, and hands stole out of sight. I saw Manny looking nervous. Hell, I wasn't so calm myself.

"Is that right?" Scollay said ominously.

The guy burst out, "I din't want to come, Mr. Scollay—the Greek, he has my wife. He say he kill her if I doan' give you his message!"

"What message?" Scollay asked. His face was like a thundercloud.

"He say—" The guy paused with an agonized expression. His throat worked like the words were physical, and caught in there. "He say to tell you your sister is one fat pig. He say . . . he say . . ." His eyes rolled wildly at Scollay's expression. I shot a look at Mau-

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reen. She looked as if she had been slapped. "He say she's tired of going to bed alone. He say—you bought her a husband."

Maureen gave a great strangled cry and ran out, weeping. The floor shook. Rico pattered after her, his face bewildered and unhappy.

But Scollay was the frightening one. His face had grown so red it was purple and I half expected his brains to just blow out his ears. I saw that same look of mad agony. Maybe he was just a cheap hood, but I felt sorry for him. You would have, too.

When he spoke his voice was very quiet.

"Is there more?"

The little Greek wrung his hands with anguish. "Please doan' kill me, Mr. Scollay. My wife—the Greek, he got my wife! I doan' want to say these thing. He got my wife, my woman! He—"

"I won't hurt you," Scollay said, quieter still. "Tell me the rest."

"He say the whole town is laughing at you."

There was dead silence for a second. We had stopped playing. Then Scollay turned his eyes to the ceiling. Both his hands were shaking and held out clenched in front of him. He was holding them in fists so tight that it seemed his hamstrings ran all the way up his arms.

"*All right!*" He screamed. "*ALL RIGHT!*"

And he ran for the door. Two of his men tried to stop him, to tell him it was suicide, just what the Greek wanted, but Scollay was like a crazy man. He knocked them down and rushed out into the black summer night.

In the dead quiet that followed, all I could hear was the little man's tortured breathing and somewhere out back, the soft sobbing of the fat bride.

Just about then the young kid who had braced us when we came in uttered a curse and made for the door.

Before he could get there, automobile tires screeched on the pavement down the block and a car engine roared.

"It's him!" The kid screamed from the doorway. "Get down, boss! Get down!"

The next second we heard gunshots—maybe as many as ten, mixed calibres, close together. The car howled away. I could see all I wanted to reflected in that kid's horrified face.

Now that the danger was over, all the goons rushed out. The door to the back of the hall banged open and Maureen ran through again, everything jiggling. Her face was even more puffy, now with tears

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as well as weight. Rico came in her wake like a bewildered valet. They went out the door.

Miss Gibson appeared in the empty hall, her eyes wide. The man who had brought the message to Scollay had powdered.

"What happened?" Miss Gibson asked.

"I think Mr. Scollay just got rubbed out," Biff said. He looked green.

Miss Gibson stared at him for a moment and then just fainted dead away. I felt a little like fainting myself.

Just then, from outside, came the most anguished scream I have ever heard, then or since. You didn't have to go and peek to know who was tearing her heart out in that street, keening over her dead brother even while the cops and news photographers were on their way.

"Let's get out of here," I muttered. "Quick."

We had it packed in before five minutes had passed. Some of the goons came back, but they were too drunk and too scared to notice the likes of us.

We went out the back, each of us carrying part of Biff's drum-kit. Quite a parade we must have made, walking up the street, for anyone who saw us. I led the way, with my horn case tucked under my arm and a cymbal in each hand. When we got to the truck we threw everything in, willy-nilly, and hauled our butts out of there. We averaged 45 miles an hour going back to Morgan, back roads or not, and Scollay's goons must not have bothered to tip the cops to us, because we never heard from them.

We never got the 200 bucks, either.

She came into Tommy Englander's speak about ten days later, a fat girl in a black mourning dress. It didn't look any better than the white satin.

Englander must have known who she was (her picture had been in the Chicago papers, next to Scollay's) because he showed her to a table himself and shushed a couple of drunks at the bar who were sniggering.

I felt really bad for her, like I feel for Billy-Boy sometimes. It's tough to be on the outside. And she had been very sweet, the little I had talked to her.

When the break came, I went over.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I said, feeling awkward and hot in the face. "I know he really cared for you—"

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"I might as well have fired those guns myself," she said. She was looking at her hands, which were really her best feature, small and well formed. She had a musician's fingers. "Everything that little man said was true."

"That's not so," I said uncomfortably, not knowing if it was so or not. I was sorry I'd come over, she talked so strangely. As if she were all alone, and crazy.

"I'm not going to divorce him, though," she went on. "I'd kill myself first."

"Don't talk that way," I said.

"Haven't you ever wanted to kill yourself?" she asked, looking up at me passionately. "Doesn't it make you feel like that when people use you and then laugh about it? Do you know what it feels like to eat and eat and hate yourself and then eat more? Do you know what it feels like to kill your own brother because you're *fat?*"

People were turning to look, and the drunks were sniggering again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I wanted to talk to her, to tell her I was sorry too. I wanted to tell her something that would make her feel better, but I couldn't think of a single thing.

So I just said, "I have to go. The next set—"

"Of course," she said softly. "Of course you do. Or they'll start to laugh at *you*. But why I came was—will you play *Roses of Picardy*? I thought you played it very nicely at the reception. Will you?"

"Sure," I said. "Glad to."

And we did. But she left halfway through the number. And since it was sort of schmaltzy for a place like Englander's, we swung into a ragtime version of *The Varsity Drag*, which always tore them up. I drank too much the rest of the evening and by closing time I had forgotten all about it, almost.

Leaving for the night, it came to me that I should have told her that life goes on. That's what you say when someone's loved one dies. But, thinking about it, I was glad I hadn't. Maybe that's what she was afraid of.

Of course now everyone knows about Maureen Romano and her husband Rico, who survives her as the taxpayers' guest in the Illinois State Penitentiary. How she took over Scollay's two-bit organization and worked it into a Prohibition empire that rivaled Capone's. How she wiped out the Greek and two other North Side gang leaders,

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swallowing their operations. Rico, the bewildered valet, became her first lieutenant and was supposedly responsible for a dozen gangland hits himself.

I followed her exploits from the West Coast, where we were making some pretty successful records. Without Billy-Boy, though. He formed a band of his own after we left Englander's, an all-black Dixieland band, and they did real well down south. It was just as well. Lots of places wouldn't even audition us with a Negro in the group.

But I was telling you about Maureen. She made great news copy, not just because she was shrewd, but because she was a big operator in more ways than one. When she died of a heart attack in 1933, the papers said she weighed 500 pounds, but I doubt that. No one gets that big, do they?

Anyway, her funeral made the front pages—more than anyone could say for Scollay, who never got anyplace past page 4 in his whole miserable career. It took ten pallbearers to carry her coffin. There was a picture of that coffin in one of the tabloids. It was a horrible thing.

Rico wasn't bright enough to hold things together by himself, and he fell for assault with intent to kill the very next year.

I've never been able to get her out of my mind, or the agonized, hangdog way Scollay had looked that first night when he talked about her.

It's all very strange. I can't feel too sorry for her, looking back. Fat people can always stop eating. Poor guys like Billy-Boy Williams can only stop breathing. I still don't see any way I could have helped either of them, but I do feel sort of bad every now and then. Probably because I'm not so young as I once was. That's all it is, isn't it? Isn't it?

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JULIAN SYMONS

Shaw was a hard man—a ruthless realist in his business, in his nonpersonal relationships, in his marriage. A man accustomed to success, to having his own way, he was "the ruler of his world." Well, for such a man, life can hold unsuspected dangers . . .

VALUE FOR MONEY

by JULIAN SYMONS

"All I ask is value for money," George Bernard Shaw said. The man on the other side of the desk, whose name was Roberts, shuffled his feet and looked miserable.

Shaw had been given his first and middle name by his parents, because it was on the night of a visit to *Arms and the Man* that he had been conceived. Others might have flinched from the names, but he had accepted them even at school, and for years now had taken pleasure in using the full name, or for preference the magic initials. He regarded himself as a disciple of the original George Bernard Shaw, who in his eyes had not been a visionary socialist but a ruthless realist, fighting battles in his dealings with theater producers, publishers, women—battles which he always won. The original Shaw had been, as he saw it, a man with cranky ideas which he cleverly exploited in plays to make himself a lot of money. In life, however, he had been a logical man, and the later GBS prided himself on being logical too.

He was 25 when he inherited from his father a small family printing firm and a couple of weekly local papers. The local papers were now a flourishing chain of 30 that covered the Midlands and extended up into Yorkshire and Lancashire. The printing works had enlarged with the papers.

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Success had not been achieved without some difficulties, as is the way of life. There had been problems with wholesalers in some areas, people who complained that GBS gave much poorer terms than his competitors, and so refused to stock his papers. These wholesalers found their vans damaged through slashed tires, sand in the tank, and other means. Their warehouses also suffered burglaries, in which stock was stolen as well as damaged or destroyed. Such difficulties ceased when they handled, and pushed, GBS papers.

Then there were union problems at the works. GBS always refused to employ union members, and the local branches threatened to black him. The two union secretaries who had led the blacking movement were badly beaten up, one sustaining several broken ribs and the other a hip injury that left him permanently lame. Half a dozen other militants suffered similar, although less severe attacks, and eventually GBS's firm was left alone. He was the ruler of his world, and the feeling was enjoyable. The interview with Roberts took place because it was understood that GBS was the last court of appeal. Roberts, when sacked, had gone to the top man.

"Value for money," GBS said. "And from the reports on the table here I'm not getting it from you."

"I've been here more than twenty years."

"Twenty-two. What then?"

"Now I'm to be turned off with a month's notice."

"You feel you are being badly treated? Let us consider." There was nothing GBS enjoyed more than an argument of this kind, in which he held all the trump cards. "You came here and stayed here of your own free will. You worked as a packer and a machine hand, jobs that required no tradesman's skills, but still you were paid more than you would have been in a union shop. Your job, however, while involving no special skill, did demand that you should stand up to do it. You now tell me this is impossible—"

"It's my leg, my arthritis. You'd never believe the pain. The specialist, he says I must sit down, not all day, I got to keep moving, but just sit down sometimes, every half hour. Standing's the worst thing for it, standing all day." Roberts was a small man with a drooping mustache. He spoke with the nasal whine of the area.

"Then of course you must sit down. But that means you are unable to do your job here."

"I'm being thrown on the scrapheap. No pension, nothing."

"You knew there was no pension scheme when you came—"

"I was young then, never thought about it."

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"Please do not interrupt. You should have thought about it, you should have saved money. Now you must look for another job."

"With my leg, and me forty-seven years old, and unemployment what it is, what chance have I got? You could find me another job here, something behind a desk, easy enough if you wanted."

GBS never ceased to be polite, but now he allowed his impatience to show. "Why should I do that? The reports I have here don't suggest that you would be able to handle such work. You have never worked behind a desk, you would be useless, and we are not a charity. You must be logical, Mr. Roberts. Value for money is the rule between employer and employee. If you felt you were worth more than we paid you, you were free to take another job. Now you are no longer giving value for money. What more is there to say?"

Roberts found other things to say, abusive and illogical things to which GBS paid no attention. He would not have admitted even to himself that he enjoyed such interviews, but he always found pleasure in pointing out that the value-for-money argument was irrefutable. The pleasure lasted during half of the forty-minute drive home. Then he began to think about Paula.

He had married Paula ten years before, when he was 35 and she ten years younger. For some time he had felt no need to marry. He had a flat in the heart of the city, and when it was necessary to entertain for business purposes, a local firm sent in an excellent cook and a maid to serve the meal. Then he had interests, apart from the firm, that kept him busy. He acknowledged the need to keep fit, and like his namesake was a useful boxer. Games seemed to him ridiculous, but he understood that they could be useful in business terms, so he made himself into an efficient golfer, particularly on the greens, since putting seemed to him the most logical part of the game.

He went often to race meetings, where he was a heavy punter. Was that illogical? Not so, for his bets were in the service of the Emergency Fund. When he won he was paid in cash, and the money went straight into a safe-deposit account in London. This was the Emergency Fund. It had been used on several occasions when the use of checks would have been inadvisable.

He acknowledged also the need for sex. He took girls out, sometimes for a day at the races, sometimes for dinner. Either way they ended up in his flat, a result he felt essential to justify the time and money spent. A time came, however, when to his own surprise he found all this unsatisfactory. He felt the need for a house of his own,

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for somebody to arrange those dinners, and to sit at one end of the table. A number of business acquaintances raised their eyebrows when they found that there was no hostess at his dinners, and he knew that there were always whispers about bachelors. Then again, a good deal of trouble in the sexual line would be saved if he had a wife. It would be a practical arrangement—she would be value for money. The right kind of wife, of course, somebody who looked on marriage as logically as he did himself.

He met Paula Mountford at a party, asked her to dinner and to the theater, but made no attempt to take her to bed. He decided that she filled the bill perfectly. She was the younger daughter of a county family that had come down in the world, good-looking enough in a slightly awkward, big-boned way, and adept in keeping her conversational end up in any sort of company. She was also a girl with an eye on the main chance, something that was evident when he took her back to the flat, kissed her, and suggested that they should get married.

"You aren't in love with me."

"I don't talk about love, it's an abstraction. I find you attractive, and we seem to get on well."

"Well enough," she said coolly. She had a thick underlip, and it was stuck out now. "I don't love you, I'm not sure that I like you very much, but you're certain of yourself, you go out for what you want, and I admire that. At the moment you seem to want me. I suppose I should be flattered."

"I'm glad you're sensible."

"Not much use being anything else when you're around," she said with a laugh.

"I've got no time for romance, it seems to me nonsense. I think you should consider whether the advantages of being married to me are enough for you."

"All right. I'll tell you what I want. A wedding in style, church not registry office, no expense spared. A house outside the city—I hate bricks and mortar all round me. An acre or so of garden. My own car, a runabout. A couple of horses—I want to keep up my hunting. Good for your image to have a wife who hunts. A big dog, retriever or labrador. A clothes account up in London, no complaints about how much I spend. That's all at the moment, though I shall think of other things I'm sure. In return I'll grace your table and share your bed. I don't suppose you want children?" He shook his head. "Luckily I'm not mad about them either."

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"We agree about everything. It sounds as though you're good value for money." He smiled as he said it, but the words were serious.

"My God, you are a swine." She pulled him to her. He was surprised, and disconcerted, by the ardency of her embrace.

Three months later Paula Mountford became Mrs. George Bernard Shaw.

For years the arrangement had, it seemed to him, worked perfectly. Paula had everything she wanted. She had chosen the house, a large modern villa out in the country with a lot of ground, and outbuildings that were converted into a stable block. She had her horses, her golden retriever. She proved to be an excellent hostess, inventive with menus, skillful in making nervous guests feel at ease. She dressed individually and with flair, and he never said a word about bills. As for sex that rather lapsed, as he felt by mutual consent. He no longer felt much need for it, and the exercise of power in the firm was something that he found much more exciting. The firm prospered, his home life prospered. He was a contented man.

Until the day when he learned that Paula had a lover.

He learned it in the simplest way. He had mislaid his cigarette lighter, looked in an old bag of hers in the hope of finding one, and there was the letter. He was an incurious man, and would not have read it except that the word "Darling" caught his eye. The words on the page seemed to him hardly credible. Could it be Paula to whom these phrases were addressed, embarrassing and ridiculous phrases of a kind that he would never have been able to bring himself to put down on paper? Paula was up in London, and it was typical of him that his first action after making the discovery was to go on looking for a lighter, then to smoke his cigarette before reading the letter again.

He congratulated himself on this calmness, but it was succeeded by a wave of anger such as he had never known. The anger had no outward manifestation—he did not break any of Paula's possessions or cut up her clothes; but the emotion shook him as he had not been shaken since he was eleven years old. He had been told then by his father that his mother had left the house forever, and gone to live with another man. He had felt that as a personal betrayal, a possession he had lost, and now he felt the same thing. Paula belonged to him; he had given her everything she ever asked for, and she had now deliberately betrayed him. She must be punished.

He made a copy of the letter and returned it to the bag. It was, again, typical of him that he did not consider asking the name of

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her lover, or asking whether the affair was over. Such questions might lead to argument, and he only argued from a position of assured superiority. Should he employ a private detective? He decided against this, partly because it was Paula's betrayal that concerned him and not the name of her past or present lover, but principally for the reason that to consult a private detective involved putting himself to some extent in the man's power, and to put himself in somebody else's power was something that he had never done.

Instead, he watched Paula himself, following her by car on the days when she said she would be going out. He did not use his own car, which she might have recognized, but rented one. In less than a week he had discovered the identity of her lover. He was a man of Paula's own age, divorced from his wife, a well-to-do gentleman farmer who was a member of the hunt she rode with. The man lived a few miles away, and she went to his house one or two afternoons a week.

But GBS was little interested in the man, and did not blame him. He appreciated that to sleep with another man's wife was a kind of triumph, one he had savored himself in his bachelor days, when the chief pleasure had been talking afterward to the unwitting cuckold. It was Paula who must be punished, but it was easier to say this than to discover the means. He did not threaten divorce, because he feared that this would be no punishment, and also it would mean that she was no longer his possession.

What else could he do that would make her miserable as she deserved to be miserable, take away forever that look of a cat almost choked with cream that he now saw on her face? He thought about it for days while the anger grew within him, grew satisfyingly because he knew that it would find an outlet. Eventually he decided that the only possible punishment was death.

It was necessary to assure himself that the punishment was just, and this was not difficult. Look at the matter logically, and it was apparent that he and Paula had an agreement. She had broken it, and no longer gave value for the money she received. It was true, and he acknowledged it, that the idea of her suffering pleased him, as he had been pleased by the lasting nature of the injuries sustained by that trade-union branch secretary. He considered, and reluctantly rejected, the idea that Paula's horse face might be permanently scarred. What would happen afterward? He could hardly divorce her without incurring blame, and he had no wish to spend the rest of his life with a disfigured woman.

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He was aware that the logic he used was that of a superior man (in a phrase, the logic of GBS), and that it would not be generally understood. In the event of Paula's death he would be an obvious suspect, and he had no intention of standing in a dock, or even suffering arrest. It was essential therefore that he should not have any apparent connection with what happened. He would work through intermediaries, but none of them must see him, or be able to make a connection leading back to him.

It was a difficult problem, but one of an intellectual kind, resembling a problem in chess. He played chess well, and in a day or two he had solved the problem.

The first person to see was Jerry Wilde. Jerry owed him a debt, but he would not rely on that. The logical man does not rely on emotion.

The debts Jerry owed him, for they were counted in the plural, went back to their days at grammar school. GBS had always been, like his namesake, long and wiry, physically capable of looking after himself. Jerry Wilde was the kind of perky little shrimp who was a natural target for bullying. It had been amusing to defend him, and to show his contempt for the rest of the school by making it clear that he would sooner talk to Jerry than to the captain of cricket.

Jerry's worshipful attitude, his readiness to run errands and in general to do what he was told, were also agreeable. He was a lively little boy, an excellent mimic, good especially at catching the tones of other boys, and a great success in the school plays. But there was a basic dishonesty about Jerry. He would cheat in exams, and GBS had once saved him from the threat of expulsion for stealing, by pretending to find the missing money, which he had provided out of his own pocket.

Jerry's later career was much what might have been predicted. He got jobs but couldn't hold them. He went on benders and failed to turn up for work, fiddled accounts when he had anything to do with money, was always ready to help in handling TV sets, cases of whiskey, or other quickly salable things without asking where they came from. GBS had saved him from an embezzlement charge by paying his employer something over the amount Jerry had taken, and from something more serious when Jerry, blind drunk at the wheel of a car, had mounted the pavement and knocked down an old-age pensioner. She had been persuaded to take money instead of pressing charges.

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Why did GBS bother with Jerry? Well, on both those occasions he had made Jerry sign a statement admitting the facts. And then Jerry seemed to know or be able to get the dirt on everybody, and GBS had made use of this knowledge. It was Jerry who had found the boys who turned the trick with the vans and those who tamed the trade unionists, who told them what to do and paid them off, so that GBS never even knew who they were. Jerry was useful.

At the moment Jerry was working for a man who cannibalized cars—put bits and pieces into other cars that had been in accidents and sold for scrap. Then he sprayed them, changed the speedo and plates, and sold them as salesman's models.

"Looking for a car, boss? Give you a good trade in on the one you've got." Jerry had always been a grinner. Above the grin his nose was bright red with alcohol, his cheeks hardly less so.

"I wanted a chat."

"Round at the King's Head?" GBS shook his head, made a gesture toward his car. "Like that, is it? Mind the shop, Bill, shan't be long." Bill, at the back of the showroom, waved a hand. They drove a couple of miles, then GBS pulled into a lay-by.

"You're going to land in trouble with those cars," Shaw said. "The V registration plate on that Jaguar, where did it come from?"

"Couldn't tell you offhand."

"And what about the registration book?"

"Looks beautiful. Don't ask where I got it, not unless you're a buyer."

"You won't get away with it for long."

"And when there's trouble who shall I run to? Don't tell me. Did we come out here for you to say that, or just to look at the traffic?"

"Neither. I need a little help."

Jerry cocked his head to one side, bird-like. "Yours to command."

"It's a little bit like the Layton business." Layton had sustained the hip injury.

"And you want me to find a couple of boys, fix it with them?"

"Not exactly. I want somebody reliable, very reliable. You find him, give me a number where I can call him. You don't, not on any account, mention my name. That's it."

"That's it?" Jerry's bright bird eye showed surprise. "You'll handle it yourself? Why and wherefore?"

"Not your business. You just give me a name and number."

"The boss orders, it shall be done." He sketched a salute. "A bit ticklish though. The sort of boy I know, he knows me. But he *don't*

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know you, if you get my meaning. If I knew the strength of what you wanted, that would help."

"No. It's better to stick to what I said."

"That means it must be strong."

He affected irritation. "If you don't want to help, say so. There'd be fifty pounds in it for you, just for a name and number."

"When have I ever said no? It's ticklish, that's all. I might have to put you on to somebody who'd pass you on, get me? Leave it with me for a day or two, I'll ask around. Discreetly mind, don't worry. That's it?"

"That's it."

"Then let's get back." When they were back at the showroom Jerry stuck his head through the car window. His breath smelled of beer and pickled onions. "About the fifty, GBS, forget it. This one's on the house."

Two days later he rang back with a name and number. "Like I said, it's someone who'll make the arrangements. Can't say more, he'll tell you the rest himself. Say you're a friend of mine when you call. Ring at five o'clock any afternoon, he'll be there. And, boss?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful. They're wide-awake, some of these boys."

The thought of the dangerous element made his blood tingle, his heart beat pleasurably faster. The danger of involvement was part of the game, its avoidance a mark of the logician's skill. Had Jerry understood that? In any case, his part was now finished, and he could say nothing damaging.

He rang the number from a public call box just after five o'clock. The voice that came on was low, cautious.

"Is that Mr. Middleton, Jack Middleton?"

"Yes."

"Jerry Wilde gave me your name, said I could call you."

"Jerry, right."

"He thought you might be able to help me with a problem."

"What sort of a problem?"

"A friend of mine needs a job done."

Now the voice rose a little, roughened, a voice definitely not out of the top drawer.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who are you, what's your name?"

"My friend wants to remain private."

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"Is that so? You just tell him my name's Jack Middleton and I like to know who I'm dealing with. Got it?"

"Yes. Don't hang up, Mr. Middleton. We're talking about a big job, a lot of money."

Silence. "How much is a lot? And what's it for?"

"My friend wants—" He found, quite unexpectedly, that he could not form the words. He was strongly conscious of the interior of the telephone box. On one wall somebody had written *Tony loves Lucy* and on another, *United Rule OK?*.

The harsh voice said, "What's up? Want somebody hit, is that it?"

Hit, did that mean killed? He was not sure. "Disposed of." The words came out choked, as if he was being strangled.

"Say it how you like. Ten grand."

"*How* much?"

"Ten grand. That covers it, my commission included."

He was so astonished that he was briefly silent. He wanted to expostulate, to say that the jobs done before had cost no more than a few hundred, but very likely Middleton knew nothing about them. When he found his voice he said, "That's much more than my friend expected. It's too much."

"Please yourself. That's the price."

"I must—must consult. I take it nothing would be payable until—"

"Half in advance, other half when it's done."

"But that would be trusting you with five thousand pounds."

"Who's trusting who, mister?" the coarse voice asked. "I don't even know your bloody name."

He left the box a little shaken. He was so used to being in a position of mastery, to dealing with everybody as he had dealt with Roberts, that to be almost in the position of a supplicant was disconcerting. Perhaps he should give up the whole thing, tell Paula that he knew of her affair, and threaten to cut off her allowance and stop her charge accounts? But supposing she ignored him, supposing she went off to live with her gentleman farmer and made him a laughingstock? Even the possibility was not to be contemplated.

That weekend they gave a dinner party. The food was delicious, Paula was as usual an admirable hostess, but he felt half a dozen times during the evening that she was mocking him. When the guests had gone he felt such a wave of fury that he could have strangled her, or shot her with the old Webley that he had inherited from his father, who had fancied himself as a shot and had set up a target in the back garden.

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In fact, the revolver was in his desk drawer and they were talking in the bedroom, so that the question of such a spontaneous action did not arise. In any event, it would of course have been stupid, illogical, unworthy of GBS. But that evening made him decide to go ahead. On Monday evening he rang Middleton again, calling as he had been told to do at five o'clock. "I've talked to my friend. He'd like to go ahead. On the lines you mentioned."

"What's his name? Your *friend*, I mean."

"No names. That's a condition."

"All right." There was an unexpected chuckle. "But there's one name you got to give me, what you might call the subject." GBS gave Paula's name, and their address. "You never said it was a woman."

He replied with a touch of his usual acerbity. "Before, we were just talking. Now it's serious, and there are things I want to know. Is your agent reliable? Does it make any difference to him that it's a woman?"

"Makes no odds to him, it's just a job. He was one of those what you call 'em, mercenaries, out in Angola, freelance now. You can talk to him yourself, make up your own mind."

"I don't want to meet him."

"You don't have to. I said talk, not meet. I'll give you a number to ring, ask for Charlie."

"About making payment—"

"Talk to Charlie. You fix it with him, you pay him, he gives me my cut. He knows there might be a job, so just mention me. Here's the number." He gave it. "Just one thing, he ain't always there. I'd call in the evening, between six and eight. After eight he's usually out with the boys."

"He's reliable, he wouldn't talk about it to them?"

"He's a professional."

The first time he rang the number there was no reply. The second time a voice answered, and said it was Charlie.

"I've been put on to you by Jack Middleton. About a job I want done."

"Jack said something, gave me the name. And you're Mr. X, incognito you might call it." The voice had a disagreeable twang to it, some accent he could not place. Was it South African? Charlie began asking practical questions. When did he want it done? As soon as possible. GBS had given some thought to the method, and said that if it could look like a car accident, that would be ideal.

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Charlie said a decisive no to that, as too hard to arrange. Then an attempted burglary of the house, the subject came home unexpectedly—

The voice with its odd twang interrupted. "You've been reading too many books, Mr. X. First thing I look after is Number One. It's got to be simple, probably at night, a gun with a silencer. If I can make it look like a robbery, okay, but don't rely on it. Don't rely on anything, except the job being done."

"When?"

"Give me a week after I've got the first installment. Let's talk about that. I want used notes, ones and fives. You drop it by a rubbish bin on the London road, I pick it up, I'll give you the details."

"No."

For the first time the voice lost its assurance. "What do you mean, no?"

"That won't do. You could check on my car or see me. You said I'm incognito. I want to stay that way. Now, this is what I propose."

Charlie listened, then said, "And the other five? When the job's done?"

"The same way."

"Fancy but clever. Think of everyting, Mr. X, don't you?"

"I try to." Then they discussed the timing.

The conversation took place on Monday evening. On Wednesday afternoon GBS took the 2:30 train out of the city. It was a slow train that stopped at several places, and it was busy during the rush hours, but two-thirds empty in the afternoons, so that he had no trouble in finding a carriage to himself.

When he was a boy they had lived at Thelsby, almost at the end of the line, and he had traveled hundreds of times on the train to school. A couple of miles before Thelsby there was a stretch of single-track line, and the train from the city always stopped to let one from the other direction come through. At the point where it stopped there was a grass embankment to one side, and often in that distant past he and Jerry had jumped out of the carriage, half run and half rolled down the grass, leaped down the steep bank at the end, and wriggled through the wire that separated the embankment from the road.

Today the train stopped as it had always done. GBS muffled his face in a scarf. There was a whistle, the train for the city passed them. He opened the carriage window. Their own train began to move, very slowly. He flung the cheap attaché case as far as he could

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down the grass slope. He could see no sign of Charlie, who was no doubt concealed behind the steep drop at the bottom. All Charlie could have seen of him was a hand, and a face hidden behind a scarf. On the way back from Thelsby he looked out to where he had thrown the attaché case, and saw only grass.

It was perfect.

He recited the perfection of it to himself all the way home. It was inevitable that after Paula's death all three people involved—Jerry, Jack, and Charlie—should assume that he had ordered it. Let them think so, for they could prove nothing. And what could the police prove? If they talked to Jerry, any admission he made would be damaging to himself, and so could be ruled out. As for Jack Middleton and Charlie, what identification could they make beyond a voice on the telephone?

Of course he would be a suspect. He was prepared for long interrogations, and even looked forward to them because he knew he would emerge from them triumphant. No doubt the police would discover the gentleman farmer, but this revelation would come as a total surprise to GBS. (How wise he had been not to use a private detective.) And the police would look in vain for any discrepancies in his bank account, or any large withdrawals, for the money had come from the Emergency Fund. Would he pay the rest of the money after the job was done? He kept an open mind about it, feeling that it must be possible to make some deal with Charlie.

It was a logical operation, and in such an operation every possibility is taken into account, so that the unexpected cannot occur. He had only to sit back and await the result.

Thursday passed, and Friday. He drove into the works as usual, chaired editorial discussions, had talks with a consortium that was talking about making an offer for two of his weeklies. While he went about these occupations he waited for the telephone call, or for the policeman who would begin, "I'm sorry to say, Mr. Shaw, that . . ." On Friday afternoon, he knew, Paula saw her farmer. Perhaps while she was driving home—or when she returned to the house?

But when he returned on Friday he was greeted by the smell of boeuf bourguignon and found Paula in the kitchen, making a first course of avocado and prawns. She had the sleek look she always wore after a session with her lover, a look that dissipated any possible feeling of regret.

On Saturday Paula went out with the hunt, on Sunday morning

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the papers were late and she drove down to the village to get them. Each time he wound himself up into a state of expectation, but nothing happened. On Sunday evening he was unable to sit still to watch TV, made an excuse, and went to his study, where he sat at his desk staring out into the dark night. When he returned she was watching a gangster film.

On Monday morning she said she was going to London. Whether she did so, or saw her farmer, she was at home in the evening.

On Tuesday nothing happened.

Give me a week after I've got the first installment. On Wednesday afternoon the week was up. And on that evening Paula came home in the best of spirits after, as she said, an afternoon spent with a couple of girl friends. They were giving a dinner party on Friday, and she had done some shopping for it.

On Thursday morning he left home as usual, went to a call box, and rang Charlie's number. No reply. He drove in to the works, dealt with correspondence, went out twice to call boxes. The number rang, but there was no answer. Ring between six and eight in the evening, Jack Middleton had said. He rang at six with no result, and then called the exchange to ask if the line was in working order. In less than a minute the operator came back to him.

"That number is a public call box."

"*What*? It isn't possible. There must be a mistake."

"I will repeat the number," the operator said, and did so. "Is that correct? Very good. That is the number of a public call box."

He asked where it was, and was given the name of a street in the east end of the city. He drove down there, looked at the red glass-windowed box, even went into it as though there might be an answer to his questions within. In some way or other he had been cheated, either by Charlie or by Jack Middleton. He did not ring Middleton, but went to see Jerry Wilde.

Jerry was in the King's Head, drinking what was obviously not his first or second brandy-and-soda. He greeted GBS with a slap on the back, and asked how things were going.

"I have to talk to you. Come out now. Right away."

"Can't be done, boss. Got to meet a man about a car. Big deal. Be here any minute. Then taking him out for a drive, back here, have a couple of drinks, argue the toss about the price—"

It might just have been possible to talk sense to Jerry now, but in an hour or two it would be useless to try.

"Come and see me tomorrow."

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"Anything you say. When and where?"

On Friday there was a meeting at the office which was likely to take all day. He told Jerry to come to the house at six o'clock. He would be gone long before seven thirty, when the dinner party guests were to arrive.

"Unexpected honor, boss. I'll be there." It was true that Jerry was not the kind of person he asked home, and that Paula did not care for him, but the circumstances were exceptional.

On Friday, punctually at six, Jerry drove up in a Jaguar, no doubt the one with the fake registration book. He wore a hat with a little feather in it, and a check suit. Paula was passing through the hall on the way to the kitchen when he arrived, and greeted him coolly. After that they went to the study. GBS sat behind his desk and told Jerry what had happened. At the end he said, "I want an explanation."

Jerry wriggled. "You know what you sound like? Old Porson, our old head. *I want an explanation, Wilde.* And I knew I'd never be able to explain, not to his satisfaction. You wouldn't have a drink handy, would you?"

"After the explanation."

"I only put you in touch with Jack Middleton. Have you tried ringing him?"

"No. It was Charlie who arranged to take the money."

"Trouble is I don't know Charlie, do I? Why not try Jack, see what he's got to say? Here, I'll dial the number for you, I know it." He did so, and held up the receiver so that GBS could hear the ringing tone. Then he dialed again.

"What are you doing?"

"Just checking. Operator, will you run a check on one-eight-three-four-six. I've been dialing and can't get a reply. What's that, what do you say? Well, I never. Many thanks." He put down the telephone, grinned. "Would you believe it, that's a public call box."

"But that isn't possible. You put me in touch with Middleton."

"That's right."

"You must know him."

"Right again, boss, I do know him." Out of Jerry Wilde's grinning face came the rough voice. "*You just tell him my name's Jack Middleton.* I know Charlie too." And GBS heard again that disagreeable twang. "*You've been reading too many books, Mr. X. First thing I look after is Number One.* I was always able to manage voices, remember?"

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Even now he could not believe it. "The attaché case. It was you who collected it."

"Nobody else. I thought it was a nice touch, dropping it where we used to scramble down as kids. Sentimental. Nearly piped my eye."

"You've robbed me, stolen five thousand pounds."

Jerry's grin became a laugh. "I don't see it that way. I reckon you owe it to me."

"But I've always helped you. I kept you out of prison."

"And made me sign statements so that you could hold 'em over me. Only you can't use 'em now, or you'd have to say why you hung on to them so long. Did you think I liked being an errand boy? Anyway, the answer's no. So when you were so mysterious I thought, well, let's see just what he's got in mind, shall we? And my word, wasn't it naughty?" Jerry wiped his red face with a handkerchief, and went on.

"I wouldn't try again to do something naughty about your wife, because I might have something interesting to tell the fuzz. And you can't do anything about the five thousand, can you, *boss*? I'm taking a holiday for a few weeks, can't make up my mind whether it's Madeira or the West Indies, but before I went I wanted to see your face when I told you. Incidentally, I bet you meant to cheat poor old Charlie out of his second five grand. Do you know where I'd say you are, boss? Up the creek without a paddle."

Before his speech was halfway through, George Bernard Shaw had ceased to be a logical and reasonable man, and had become a machine filled with nothing but hatred for the creature opposite him. He acted not reasonably, but from this uncontrollable hatred, when he opened the right-hand drawer of the desk, took out the revolver, and shot Jerry Wilde neatly between the eyes.

George Bernard Shaw went to Broadmoor. There he became the chess champion, and every month composed a chess problem which he sent to the world champion, challenging him to solve it. From the fact that he never received any reply to these communications he made the logical deduction that the champion was unable to solve the problems, and by an extension of this logic that George Bernard Shaw was the best chess player in the world.

"Q"

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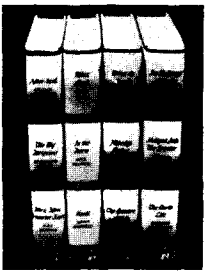

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